

THE PAINFUL TRUTH ABOUT NARCISSISTIC FAMILIES



Understanding Narcissistic Families

Narcissistic families do a very good job of looking "normal" to the outside world. But inside they are full of self-loathing, hurt, anger, anxiety and pain.

The impact of having a narcissistic family of origin can last a lifetime and reveal itself in relationships, behaviours, thoughts and feelings.

This guide will reveal the truth behind the curtain of narcissistic families with the aim of helping:

- Individuals who have experienced a narcissistic family of origin
- Those who have escaped a narcissistic family (either through birth or marriage) but are struggling with comprehending their reality
- Those who are attempting to co-parenting with a narcissist and have concerns about their child repeating these same damaging patterns
- Anyone who is going to court against a narcissist and is looking for more understanding and the correct terminology to use when explaining the situation to professionals
- Anyone with an interest in understanding narcissistic families

Types of Narcissist

There are many different terms used to describe narcissists (cerebral, somatic, overt and covert, malignant) but I think these labels sum up the behaviours much clearer.

THE CLASSIC NARCISSIST

They see the child as an extension of themselves and wants the child to be and become what they — the parent — wants them to be. They will make all decision for the child and the child will struggle with their own identity.

Classic or "overt" narcissism is usually pretty easy to spot, but can still do enormous damage to a child who relies completely on their narcissistic parent to provide for their needs.

Common Behaviours of Classically Narcissistic Parents:

Boasting of their child's accomplishments as if they were their own accomplishments.

Shaming or belittling a child's accomplishments if they feel threatened by the child's success.

Only showing love to a child if they act in a way that is pleasing to them.

Withholding love if a child doesn't bend to their will or desires.

COVERT NARCISSIST

Covert narcissists are quiet, socially avoidant and couldn't care less about looks or fame or money. They love to play the victim and martyr and struggle with criticism.

In addition to "one-upping" others' struggles (including their child's) by insisting their own are worse or more pressing, covertly narcissistic parents can be manipulative in order to get what they need. This kind of narcissistic parent is highly sensitive — someone we might call an emotionally fragile parent. Most narcissistic people have fragile self-esteem, but the covert narcissistic parent is especially so. They often depend on their children to "hold them together" emotionally, and even feel entitled to a child's care, because they believe the child is an extension of them.

Behaviours of Covertly Narcissistic Parents:

Leaning on their child for the emotional and self-esteem support they should be providing to their child — also known as parentification.

Playing "favourites" among the children, favouring the ones who offer them the most support or validation they crave.

Trying to "one-up" a child's struggles, what the narcissistic parent is going through is always harder, more difficult and more important than what the child is experiencing.

Feeling entitled to being taken care of by the child.

COMMUNAL NARCISSIST

Communal narcissists believe they are the most helpful, empathetic and nurturing people around. Narcissistic parents who fall into this category believe their good deeds set them apart from other people, and they crave to be validated in this area. This kind of narcissistic parent can fly under the radar because they appear altruistic on the outside — even though their drive to help others is typically feeding their self-interested desire to feel special. A communal narcissistic parent can make a child feel neglected

As they watch their parent devote more time to helping others than being their parent, they may internalize the belief, "Other people are more important than me."

Behaviours of Communal Narcissistic Parents:

Being the most-involved PTA member, church-goer, community organizer, etc. so they appear to be the best, most loving parent outwardly, but then neglect their child at home when no one is watching.

Announcing how much money they've given to others and how little they've spent on themselves.

Putting down their child by insisting their needs are petty and shallow, while at the same time championing their own life for being full of deep meaning and purpose.

In my opinion, most narcissists can display elements of each of these but one will be their default character.

Characteristics of Narcissists

The likelihood is that very few people will know someone who has clinically diagnosed Narcissistic Personality Disorder because narcissists will rarely seek help for their behaviours. They are often diagnosed with other disorders which mask the true condition. However, I do feel it is important that you know what the official diagnostic criteria is so that we can look at how it presents in families:

- (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

NPD in the family context:

1. Will expect everyone to bow down to them in the family. Has high behavioural expectations of the children. Wants everyone to think they are the perfect parent so will push the child into presenting as perfect which can cause a child great anxiety and make them very fearful of mistakes
2. Can totally distort reality for the whole family by becoming fixated on what they "should" be doing or being. Children will often overhear their children lie to other people and this can be very confusing when the narcissist (and school/nursery and society in general) have a zero tolerance on lying. The child will struggle to organise their morality as it is one rule for the narcissist and another for everyone else.



3. The narcissist may over exaggerate the child's skill or experience in order for the narcissist to achieve their own aim of feeling special. This can set the child up for disappointment, failure and rejection which the narcissist will then punish them for "making them look bad"
4. Narcissists will ruin special occasions, including their own children's birthdays to make themselves centre of attention. Parties can be extravagant to show off and have everyone tell them what amazing parents they are for going to so much trouble. They will often exert themselves into situations which are none of their business because they feel they have the power to influence (grandiose sense of self) and then take all the credit (even if they did very little or even made it worse)
5. Narcissists expect everyone to do as they say. The rule by fear and neglect. If family members disobey them they are punished either with rage or silence and others learn to do as they are told.
6. Everyone is a commodity to the narcissist including their own children. They will parade them to gain attention from others but ignore them when they do not serve them. This is very confusing to children who need stability and consistency from their parents. Children will also witness lots of changes in people who are around the narcissist. They make and break relationships really easily so children learn not to become too attached to anyone.
7. To the narcissist, the only feelings that matter are their own. Their mood becomes the mood of the whole family. Everyone learns to respond and sooth the narcissist. In a healthy parent-child relationship, the parent soothes the child but when a parent lacks empathy it is the child who soothes the parent, teaching the child their feelings are not important and making it difficult for them to recognise their own feelings as they are so enmeshed with the narcissists.
8. The narcissist doesn't trust anyone and so have a very persecutory view of life. Coupled with their grandiose sense of self and their belief they are entitled, when they see others with things they want or deem of value they become very jealous and can make accusations as to how someone made that achievement. They will even accuse their own children of lying, cheating or stealing from them.
9. A narcissistic parent looks down on everyone and is quick to criticise. They will compare their children to themselves and others to belittle their achievements.

There are some additional behaviours which are common for narcissists to exhibit:

Projection - the narcissist will tell the child they are feeling something which they are not which can cause long term identity issues as they are unsure what their own feelings feel like

Conditioning through punishment and reward - children of narcissists tend to seek out vulnerable relationships because they have been conditioned to seek out punishment and reward for their behaviours in order to get the attention they need



Triangulation - we will be covering this more shortly but essentially narcissists will use their children to get around someone's boundaries

Idealise and devalue - children of narcissists cycle through being idealised and devalued on a daily basis as they try to meet the expectations of the narcissist. We will explore this more later

Fear - PTSD and developmental trauma is common in children of narcissists. Their bodies become addicted to the stress hormones and this can cause long term damage to their brain.

Create anxiety - children of narcissists never know where they stand with a narcissistic parent because the narcissist has a disorganised attachment style (more on this later) which creates extreme anxiety as they are unsure how to behave to get their own needs met

Gaslighting - one of the narcissists favourite tools is to distort reality so that they can then control it and they do that by constantly changing the goals posts, denying what was said and making the child question what they saw, heard and felt. It contributes to PTSD, anxiety and long term mental health problems

Emotionally unstable - the narcissist does not have the skills to regulate their own emotions and so they rely upon others (either a spouse or their children) to soothe them. Children quickly learn to spot the signs of dysregulation and how to appease their parent. Walking on eggshells contributes to PTSD, anxiety and long term mental health problems

Alienation and isolation - narcissistic families have secrets which they must keep at all costs. This means relationships are superficial and children's friendships have to be approved by the narcissist. If anyone disobeys the narcissist or doesn't meet their expectations they are cut off completely. Children learn by observing the price of disobedience.

Common Themes

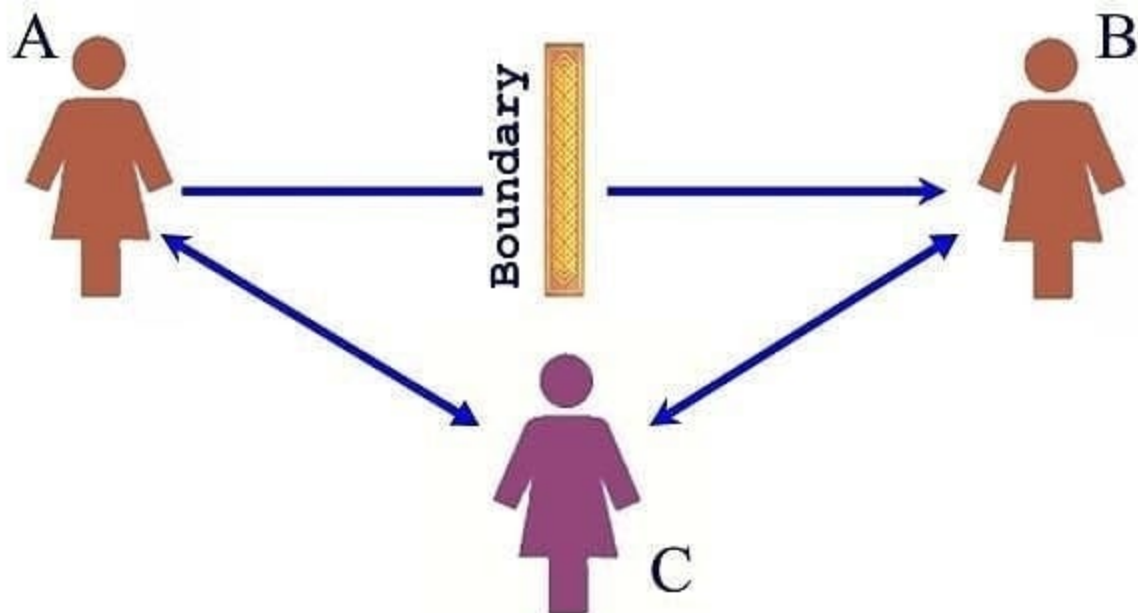
Narcissistic families follow a pattern of behaviour and are almost identical in every narcissistic family. Understanding these themes can help you to move out of the dynamic and into a healthier relationship.

Triangles

We all know narcissists love to triangulate. Well they will do it with their own children as well as everyone else.

Triangles service three main purposes for the narcissist:

1. They get to abuse boundaries
2. They keep everyone in set roles designated by the narcissist
3. They can be used to ostracise anyone who doesn't play by their rules



Triangulation occurs when person A has a boundary that person B does not want to respect. To get around the boundary, person B establishes a relationship with a third person C who is close to person A and uses that person to get "inside" with person A by proxy, hence violating the boundary.

Families will often not communicate directly with one another but through other family members. No one knows who they can trust and this is all purposefully directed by the narcissist to ensure that they remain in control. This also covertly sends the message to everyone that "you are not good enough" because they do not feel valued by anyone.

Another use of the triangle for the narcissist is that they create a very clear hierarchy with them firmly established at the top of the tree. Even the spouse is below them and can often be replaced by a child. The narcissist will involve children in parental arguments and encourage them to align with them. This achieves three things:

- Gives the child power they are not emotionally or cognitively capable of understanding and dealing with
- Pushing the other parent out of the adult position, taking away their authority and putting them into a position of being controlled
- Making it easier for emotional cutoff to occur

The narcissist is always ready for the relationship to end and so creating this hierarchy and involving the children, means they are ready for the emotional cutoff which comes at the end of a relationship. They will then initiate something known as a role reversal.

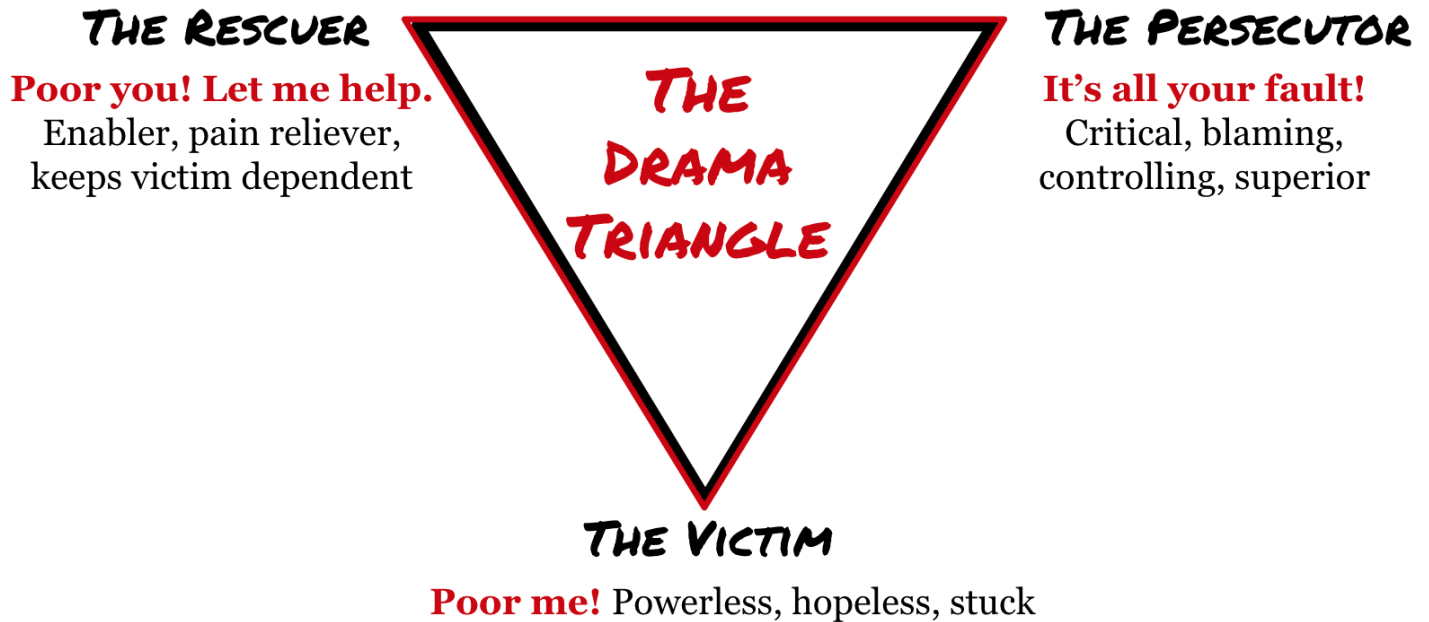
This reverse is achieved through a range of behaviours by the narcissistic parent. Firstly, the child becomes the regulatory object for the parent which means that they respond to the emotions of the parent (as the ex spouse used to). The child learns to read the parent's emotions and responds accordingly to prevent them from completely dysregulating through anger, rage or withdrawal.

The child has been conditioned to know that this is the only way to keep the attachment in tact, which they are desperately clinging on to for survival. The narcissistic parent will punish the child when they don't meet their needs and reward them when they do. Regular repetition of these behaviours ensures the role-reversal relationship is permanent.

The final part of ensuring the hierarchy is reversed, is for the child to completely align themselves with the narcissistic parent which is achieved by creating an "understanding of shared grievances" against the other parent. For example, the child picks up a picture of the other parent and the narcissistic parent gets really mad. The child puts the picture in a drawer and the narcissistic parent buys them a new toy. They then push that to evoking criticism of the targeted parent using the same conditioning techniques. The child may say they had a good time with the other parent and the narcissist lashes out and tells them they are so ungrateful for all that they do for them. So the child mentions they had a disagreement and the narcissistic parent gives them a hug and tells them that they understand how angry and controlling the targeted parent can be. The child quickly learns that to regulate the narcissistic parent's emotions and get their own needs met, they simply need to criticise the other parent. This is pushed and pushed until the child rejects the parent, believing it is their own choice. This reduces the anxiety for the parent which in turn reduces the anxiety for the child. At this point the ex spouse is alienated from their own children and the child has lost a loving and healthy parent.

Is your child alienated from you? If so our [GET COURT READY](#) course can help you to fight in Family Court to save your relationship

Another triangle at play is the drama, or Karpman, triangle. This is not only playing out in this scenario but is often the basis of the trauma reenactment.



The narcissist will pull the children into the triangle to play whichever role is remaining. If the narcissist has decided they are the victim today, the spouse must be the abuser so the narcissist will encourage the child to take their side and "gang up" on the other parent. If the narcissist chooses to be the rescuer, they can accuse either their spouse or the child as the other roles. The narcissist will accuse the child of being abusive towards the spouse or another child so that they can "rescue them" and manipulate the relationship to win their affection and look like a hero. The narcissist will only ever play the part of the hero or the victim.

Unfortunately the impact on the child is that they take on all three roles in this triangle and learn that relationships are about drama and manipulation. Leading them to seek out abusive partners themselves in adulthood.

Co-narcissism

All members of a narcissistic family can become co-narcissistic because the personality, opinions and feelings of the narcissist are dominant amongst family members. Everyone is conditioned to think the same and there is very little individualisation within narcissistic families. It is very cult-like. As adults, members struggle with their own identity and often seek validation from others and can be people-pleasers.

Fabricated Illness

Many narcissists use either their own "illness" or the children's "illness" to control public perception of them, ensure they can act the martyr, create a co-dependency amongst family members and use guilt to control everyone. Being mislabelled as having an illness is extremely confusing for a child who feels fine but is constantly being told they are X, Y and Z. It also teaches them that deception and manipulation can get you sympathy and attention which is a foundation for narcissistic behaviour in adulthood.

Parentification

Narcissists have no understanding of child development and so will expect their children to do things which they simply are not capable of due to their age. Narcissistic parents will criticise their children for not doing what they want them to, even though they do not have the capacity to do it, which leaves the children feeling they are a failure and letting the parent down in some way.

They will also expect the child to take care of them. This may be physically but is usually emotionally.

Everyone in the family has responsibility for managing the narcissists emotions but for very young children this impacts brain development, especially around emotional processing, because they children learn about emotions from their parents helping them to understand and process them but with narcissists, it is the child who has to help the parent.

Infantilisation

The opposite of parentification is INFANTILISATION. This is when a parent keeps their child as a baby to meet their own emotional needs. Narcissists do not want their children to grow up, become independent and leave the nest. They want to keep control over them and so they will limit the child's opportunities to grow up. It may present as making decisions for the child, not letting them do age appropriate activities (seen as over-protective parent) or letting them sleep in their bed. All children go through a number of stages on the way to adulthood and independence. Any disruption to that process can be problematic for children and impact future relationships, self esteem and even academic achievement and long term prospects.

Generational Trauma

Trauma gets passed down from generation to generation until someone decides to do the work and heal the wounds. We learn how to interact, have relationships, view ourselves and the world from our early experiences. Life with a narcissistic parent means the overriding theme is trauma. Trauma creates long term damage to the brain and this impacts how we interact with the world. If you grow up seeing power, control and manipulation, you tend to attract the same types of relationships as adults. Helping yourself or your child to heal that trauma can break the cycle.

Discard

Everyone is a commodity to a narcissist including their own children. The moment they are of no use to them, they will discard them. This can be hard for a child to understand and they will often internalise guilt and shame, thinking they must have done something wrong and they weren't good enough.

Family Roles

Golden Child

Conforms to avoid rejection, criticism and shame

Presents as being a high achiever, follows the rules, seeks approval from others, very responsible

Inside they feel guilt, hurt and inadequate

Scapegoat

Are the emotional punch bag for the family

Presents as being hostile, defiant, rule breaker, in trouble

Inside they feel rejected, hurt, guilty, jealous and angry

Mascot

Often the family clown whose role is to make others happy

They present as immature, fragile, cute, hyperactive and distracted

Inside they are fearful, anxious and insecure

Victim

They are dependent upon the family

They present as hostile, manipulative, aggressive or self pitying, blameful, charming and having rigid values

Inside they feel shame, guilt, fear, pain and hurt

Overcoming parental narcissism

Establish firm boundaries

Be clear on what you will and won't tolerate. Practice grey rock techniques and saying no. You have been conditioned to do as you are told and to obey. You know that not doing so will result in rage, silence or smear campaigns. You have to make peace with the consequences.

Structure in all settings can provide children with a safe, predictable, and secure buffer from insidious psychological damage. The emotional roller coaster a narcissistic parent perpetrates can be even more detrimental to a child's healthy ego-development than overt abuse.

Nurture your inner child

You didn't get the parents you deserved. You can't change that. But you can give yourself what your younger self needed. Be kind to yourself. Love yourself unconditionally.

Unleash your superhero

What happened to you isn't fair but staying in the victim mentality gives the narcissist all the power so it's time to realise you are more powerful than you think. You are in control of your own life. You decide what you do on a day to day basis, you get to create your own future. Set yourself some clear goals of how you want your life to look.

Help your child to feel strong by giving them choices at home. Help them decide what they want out of the relationship with their parent and support them whatever they decide.

Reduce your contact

It is OK to put yourself first and only speak to your family on your terms. Your well-being is your responsibility and priority. Limit the length of phone calls, decide what topics you will or won't talk about. Have an exit plan if you go to visit.

The narcissist will use contact with their child to control you. It is triangulation. Ensure that call times (including length of call) and methods (who calls who, what app is used) are included in your parenting plan. You do not have to be present. If your child isn't old enough to make the call, you can start the call and leave them to it.

Learn, teach and model social/emotional intelligence

If your parent was a narcissist, you may struggle with your emotions. Take the time to really FEEL your emotions. Don't be afraid of them. Notice where they are in your body and understand that all emotions have a purpose.

Give lots of praise and examples of the behaviours you want to see in your child. I recommend family meetings and rules to help them develop problem solving skills. Encourage them to label their own emotions through what they feel and sense in their own body. Narcissists project which can make emotions confusing for children. Also make sure you let them know how you are feeling so that they can see what a healthy expression of emotions looks like.

Nurture your child's unique qualities and independence

Narcissists are self centred and they see their children as extensions of themselves. This can present as both egotistical admiration and self hatred depending on their mood. Help your child to see themselves as an individual by encouraging them to know their own likes, dislikes, wants and needs. Narcissistic families are often enmeshed so nurturing their independence is so important in helping them to differentiate themselves from their parent. It will protect them from being used and abused in the future.

Helping other to understand

If your friends and family (or even professionals) are struggling to understand the dynamics of your family, here are some examples of narcissistic parents from films:

- Mother from Tangled
- Stepmother from Ever After A Cinderella Story
- Mommy dearest
- Holy hell - family dynamics
- Shameless - father
- Rachel Getting Married
- Marvellous Mrs Maisel
- Ordinary people

How to use this guide

1. *To help you understand what you have been through*
Unless you have had a personal relationship with a narcissist, it is impossible to understand. People will tell you "that's just family" or "I'm sure it wasn't that bad" which can make you feel isolated and paranoid. It reinforces that "you were the problem" message which has been hammered into you. Having it written out like this can help you to make sense of it because it's real.
2. *To see how your family has impacted your behaviour*
Part of your recovery is about recognising your own behaviours. Being able to trace it back can put it in context and take away the shame you may be feeling
3. *To provide more clarity on the impact this is having on your children*
If you have children with a narcissist, you won't be co-parenting so you will have very little insight into what your child is going through at home. They won't want to talk about it for fear of getting in trouble. This guide will help you to better understand what is happening at home for them and therefore offer them the best support
4. *To provide some framework for professionals to understand the family dynamics*
As previously stated, unless someone has experience with a narcissist, they just won't get it and that can't be really frustrating. Added to that the fact that narcissists are brilliant liars, highly manipulative and very charming, the likelihood is that professionals think the sun shines out of their backside. This guide provides a look behind the curtain at what is REALLY going on which may help to unpick the narrative the ex has created. Whilst I would consider sharing the document with them, it can help you to point out some of the behaviours which are of greatest concern

Dealing with a narcissistic parent?

Whether you are the child of a narcissist or attempting to co-parent with a narcissist, we at The Nurturing Coach can provide you with the specialist support you need to rebuild your life and protect yourself and your children moving forward. We understand the long term impact narcissists have on your sense of reality, your view of yourself and the world and your confidence in ever recovering. We promise you that you can and we are here to help you

[Find Out More](#)