

Narcissism and Abuse

<https://www.thehotline.org/2016/08/30/narcissism-and-abuse/>

Trying to find an explanation for an abusive partner's behavior can be an exhausting task. It is natural to want to understand how someone we care deeply about, who says they care for us, is capable of saying and doing things to us that are hurtful or even dangerous. Additionally, the sheer amount of articles and opinions on abusive behaviors can become overwhelming. Terms like narcissistic, antisocial/sociopath or borderline personality often come up in that search for answers. Many of these labels are used loosely in the media we read and watch, and here on the lines, we hear them a lot.



“I think my partner is a narcissist.”

“Narcissist” is one of the more common terms we hear from callers and chatters about their abusive partners. This word is most often used to describe a person who is egotistic or self-serving and does not acknowledge the feelings of others. It is important to remember that narcissistic characteristics can show up to varying degrees in any person, but this is not necessarily an indicator that a person is dealing with a personality disorder.

A person who has narcissistic personality disorder, as described in the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” (DSM-IV), shows extreme, rigid and consistent expressions of narcissism, including:

- Expectations of superior treatment from others
- Fixations on fantasies of power, success, intelligence, attractiveness, etc.
- A belief that they are unique, superior and associated with high-status people and institutions
- Needing constant admiration from others
- A sense of entitlement to special treatment and to obedience from others
- Exploitation of others to achieve personal gain
- An unwillingness to empathize with others’ feelings, wishes or needs
- Intense jealousy of others and the belief that others are equally jealous of them
- Pompous and arrogant demeanor

Whether using the DSM or an internet search, it’s easy to see how these traits might sound spot-on to describe abusive partners. The same can also be said of characteristics of other personality disorders. It can feel empowering to be able to define your partner using these commonly-cited personality disorders. But, labeling a person with a diagnosis without intensive knowledge and experience, or based on generalizations, can be problematic in a few ways.

Although disorders and diagnoses are often go-to explanations for abusive behavior, we know that mental health issues do not excuse or directly cause intimate partner abuse. At this time, there is no research that conclusively shows that a higher percentage of abusive partners deal with mental illness or disorders (including narcissistic personality disorder) than the general population. Some abusive partners may be living with narcissistic personality disorder, but many of them are not. And while people managing mental health disorders may face the stigma of violence or abuse, it’s important to understand that having a mental health disorder does not mean that a person will be emotionally or physically abusive. There is no causal link between mental health issues and the choice to abuse one’s partner.

Connecting an abusive partner’s abusive behaviors with a disorder can also blur the line between free will and something seen as “unchangeable.” Many disorders, including narcissistic personality disorder, are marked by a person’s inability to identify their behaviors as unhealthy or show empathy to those affected by their actions, greatly reducing the possibility of change. When people consider their partner’s behavior in this way and apply a label like “narcissist,” it may lead to a belief that their partner has no control over their behavior or even a feeling of acceptance of their behavior.

Or, a person might feel that if only their partner could get diagnosed, they could get some combination of medication and therapy to turn things around. However, medication is not a fix-all and is not appropriate for everyone managing a mental health disorder. It is also important to keep in mind that medication is not a treatment method for abusive behaviors. Abusive behavior would need to be addressed separately. We know that whether someone has a mental health disorder or not, they are always in control of their choices and abuse is a choice that someone makes. Therefore, medication cannot be an appropriate solution.

Mental health disorders are commonly used as a way to justify and excuse abusive behaviors when in reality an abusive partner is in control of their actions. Abusers often minimize or deny their behaviors, or even shift the blame to the non-abusive person. While it can feel like your partner "just doesn't get it" and lacks self-awareness, this is often an emotionally abusive tactic used to make the other partner question themselves. It is not uncommon for an abusive partner, whether they are managing a mental health disorder or not, to use that as an excuse for their behaviors. We often point to a few signs that highlight an abusive partner's ability to choose or control their behaviors:

- **They choose to limit how far the abuse goes and when it happens.** For example, they will become physically threatening but not hit their partner. Or, they will be abusive only in ways that cannot be recorded by their partner as evidence.
- **They only behave abusively toward their partner.** Someone managing a personality disorder will exhibit behaviors across the different areas of their life, not just with their partner. That means, if a person is manipulative with their partner, they will act similarly at work, with friends, or in other social settings. This often makes it difficult to maintain both professional and personal relationships, in addition to their intimate partnerships.
- **Their behaviors escalate.** While the dynamic of a person's mental health can change over time and circumstance, behaviors are generally consistent over time. One tactic abusive partners use is choosing not to behave abusively during certain periods, but gradually intensifying the abuse as the relationship progresses. An abusive partner manages how their behaviors present over time.

It's important to understand that whether or not your partner is dealing with a mental health disorder or issue, you are not responsible for their behaviors. Your partner could be diagnosed with a personality disorder and still choose to not be manipulative and controlling. If your partner is dealing with mental health issues, that is something they will need to acknowledge and seek support for on their own. The same is true for getting support in addressing abusive behaviors. If your partner is abusive, their behavior is never something you can cause and is not something you can "fix." In the end, a person must actively choose for themselves to take the steps needed to make a change.