

# Narcissistic Abuse Is the Scary New Kind of Emotional Abuse You Need to Know About

This dangerous abuse has been in the spotlight recently—here's how to recognize it.

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Have you ever known someone who thinks they're better and more important than everyone else in the world? Not only are they totally self-absorbed, but they lack empathy for others: Their own feelings, opinions, and desires are the only things that matter. If this description reminds you of anyone you've ever met, you've likely crossed paths with a narcissist.

How detrimental that person is to your life depends on the extent of your relationship as well as just how narcissistic they are. "Narcissism is a continuum. Narcissists come in many forms and flavors, from the casually self-obsessed to the deeply pathological," says California-based relationship expert Robert Weiss, PhD, MSW.

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If you've been in a close relationship (romantic or otherwise) with someone who's an extreme narcissist—perhaps they meet the criteria for a psychiatric disorder called narcissistic personal disorder (NPD)—then you may have suffered quite a lot. You might have even become the victim of something called "narcissistic abuse," a term that's been in the headlines recently thanks to accusations about newly elected Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison.

In case you haven't been following the story closely, Ellison's ex-girlfriend, Karen Monahan, has alleged that Ellison subjected her to narcissistic abuse: She claims he cursed at her while trying to drag her off a bed, lied to her all the time, and made it "seem like it was my fault for even asking why something happened."

## **The facts on narcissistic abuse**

Narcissistic abuse is not a clinical term. "It's a lay term," explains Weiss. "It's used when someone is very self-centered and unrelenting with their need to go first, be first, and be noticed." (Weiss did not treat Monahan or Ellison.)

When most people talk about narcissistic abuse, they're referring to emotional abuse that's committed by someone who's a narcissist. And emotional abuse—whether the perpetrator is a narcissist or not—can be incredibly difficult and dangerous to endure.

According to the National Domestic Abuse Hotline, emotional abuse can take many different forms. In an effort to control and manipulate you, the abuser might constantly monitor your whereabouts, insult you, threaten you, isolate you from family and friends, withhold affection, cheat on you (and blame you for it), say that you're lucky to be with them, and generally make you feel worthless and dependent on them.

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Gaslighting is also common: The person will try to convince you that you're the crazy one and that you're imagining conversations or events in a way that's inaccurate. The goal is to make you as reliant on them and the relationship as possible.

Of course, not everyone who's in a relationship with a narcissist ends up getting emotionally abused. "Some people have very healthy relationships with a narcissist," says Weiss. "Others are drained of self, life, and spirit by the narcissist." The more narcissistic someone is, the more likely it is that those in their wake will be hurt.

## **If you're a victim of narcissistic abuse**

If you suspect you may be dealing with narcissistic abuse or emotional abuse of any kind, talk to a mental health professional. In some instances, you might be

able to save the relationship, but other times it's better to part ways (though you may need help doing that).

"Being in a relationship with someone who takes up all the air in the room doesn't demonstrate meaningful interest in you, even if they say they love you," says Weiss. "Relationships are a two-way street, and that's necessary for emotional health."

In less severe cases, "prodependence-oriented" treatment may be an option. "It allows the person to stay in the relationship but in healthier ways," says Weiss, who recently published a book on this topic. "Prodependence looks at the positive aspects of living with people who are challenging, paying attention to how we benefit from their strengths and vice versa."

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While it might be hard to imagine anything good about dealing with a narcissist, there are often quite a number of pluses (provided the person isn't fully pathological). "Narcissism is a positive trait when expressed as confidence, self-esteem, and assertiveness," says Weiss. "When it looks like arrogance, control, and entitlement, the balance tips toward the negative."

Whatever your next step, know that you don't have to figure it all out on your own. "People in relationships with narcissists need lots of support and encouragement and help finding parts of themselves that may have been stunted by the narcissist," says Weiss.

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