THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF RELATIONAL TRAUMA AND LOSS OF INTERPERSONAL SELF-ESTEEM OF WOMEN IN NARCISSISTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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ROLE OF NARCISSISM IN RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

This research addresses the influence of pervasive narcissistic negative behavior among marriage partners. The purpose of this research is to investigate through extensive literature review, if and how individual women experience psychological distress as a result of marrying a narcissistic partner. A review of literature reveals that not enough research on the effects of narcissism in relationships is available. Notwithstanding, research has found that narcissistic personality traits are correlated with dissatisfaction in heterosexual marriage and intimate partner relationships (Links & Stockwell, 2002). There is also evidence that suggests some level of aggression and underlying abuse is related to narcissists in relationships. The behavior of individuals with narcissistic traits may affect the partner for years, during the relationship and post-relationship period. According to Solomon (1992), female partners are more likely to seek treatment for physical and mental disorders during the length of the relationship than male partners. Additionally, these partners who seek help experience emotional distress and psychosomatic symptoms in the form of low-self-esteem, identity-loss, anxiety, and depression. This study employs a theoretical approach to investigate conceptual aspects of women’s experiences, based on literature, in or as a result of their relationships to narcissistic partners. This method is preferred because it is the best model for this type of research. The electronic version of this dissertation is available in the open-access OhioLink ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd.

Keywords: Narcissism, traits, grandiose, entitlement, marriage, relationships, abuse, victim, identity, loss, trauma, and self-esteem.
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Dedication

To my family and friends who believed and supported me every step of the way.
To the most special people in my life, my children Louisa, Nicolas and Lucas for their eternal love and encouragement.
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Chapter I Introduction

Introduction to the Study

The following is a theoretical research meant to investigate, criticize, clarify, and expand the conceptual overview of the experience of women who have separated from male partners exhibiting narcissistic traits. Theories are formulated to better explain a certain phenomenon and, in some cases, challenge the existing body of knowledge. Rudestam & Newton (2007) describes the process: “In a theoretical dissertation, you will be expected to argue from the literature that there is a different way of understanding a phenomenon than has heretofore been acknowledged” (p. 55). The choice of this topic has personal meaning because of a passionate interest in understanding the impact of narcissism in relationships. The study is relevant to clinical psychology because it facilitates understanding clients who came in with similar experiences, offering additional data on relationship and personality disorders for other researchers. It adds additional understanding on complex relational dynamics.

My interest in the subject began when I met women who had had traumatic experiences with narcissism. My curiosity about the phenomena started at a very young age. In the process of meeting women whose personal stories included a narcissistic marriage my interest grew as the intricate details of their lives were revealed.

The majority of studies focus on women in relationships with narcissistic men. This research aims to investigate the experiences of women who found themselves affected by a relationship with a narcissistic partner. Men can certainly find themselves in relationships with narcissistic women, but for the purposes of this research, the focus is
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on the prevailing pattern of women who have narcissistic male partners.

The partner of a narcissist must eventually come to terms with the fact that she was fooled. This relationship lacks normal reciprocity because the narcissist uses her to feed his bottomless pit of narcissistic needs. By definition, there is no healthy relationship without reciprocity. The sooner a partner realizes this, the more quickly she can start creating boundaries and recognize what is going on when she triggers his abusive, narcissistic responses and stop internalizing them as being her fault or something that she did. The review of the literature will support the understanding that the low-level of satisfaction in these narcissist driven relationships is an indication of trouble – a big red flag that the relationship is abnormal.

Women who love narcissists need to be awakened to the fact that somehow they got to a place where they are sacrificing their own happiness and well-being for the sake of a relationship. Many may wonder what the wound is within them that keeps them seeking a relationship where normal, loving reciprocity is not possible. The dynamic with a narcissist is so disorienting and confusing that it is easy for these women to forget the very basic rule that love should lift up, not tear down. Part of recovery is actually recognizing abuse for what it is, insisting that one’s own happiness matters, rebuilding self-esteem, and taking time to assess a person’s character over time when dating, to actually see if all that glitters is really gold.

**Statement of the Problem**

Marrying a person with narcissistic traits often creates an imbalance in the partnership. In fact, in most cases, there is no partnership, but often a one-sided bond and dysfunctional experience. As mentioned later in the research, it can be described as a
trauma bond, bearing more resemblance to a hostage and captor dynamic that creates co-
dependency. Women feel trapped by the neediness and demands of their narcissistic
spouses. They may become depressed and feel guilty if they take care of themselves
rather than their self-loving partner. Many empirical studies establish a correlation
between depression and marital discord (Prince & Jacobson, 1995). This imbalance often
leads to the marriage’s dissolution. Healthy marriages are based on mutuality, which is
absent in narcissistic relationships, leading to ongoing loneliness and disappointment
(Wallsten, 2000). Moreover, the pain of this marital experience often leaves the non-
narcissistic partner psychologically damaged.

To be healed, the woman must recognize the insidious abuse of the narcissist for
what it is. She must break the trauma bond by no longer internalizing and no longer
accepting the responsibility for her partner’s behavior, as if she were causing it. She must
acknowledge that she cannot fix the other person by absolving him of responsibility. It is
human nature for one to seek fulfillment in a partnership, to desire a mate for life but to
maintain their individuality. One must maintain boundaries, know where they begin and
end, and learn to recognize when a partner is pushing those boundaries.

Professionals in the field of psychology who see these couples in their offices often
find partners of narcissists completely confused by the relationship. These women feel as
if they are trying so hard to make it work, but cannot figure out why Dr. Jekyll at times
spontaneously erupts into Mr. Hyde.

Method

In this theoretical dissertation I have chosen a qualitative method approach, in order
to form a theory based on the review of the work of several theorists who have
contributed to the field. The theorists I mention have helped me understand the dynamic of the relationships studied, as well as the personality disorder investigated. “Qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities; that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p.17, Leary 1991), suggests that research should provide enough knowledge to describe behaviors; therefore, it may help predict how people behave in the future. Theories are created to explain in the most integrative way, a certain phenomenon. This theory would portray and explain the research problem, with critique of the gaps in the literature.

Theoretical research helps the reader make critical evaluation of the topic. It also allows the researcher to have more access to existing knowledge, and limits generalizations.

The researcher must have a multifaceted knowledge of the subject at hand, based on the literature review, personal experiences, and critical thinking. Building a theory requires extensive research; the process requires recognition of concepts and ideas, which may be similar to one another, or distinctively unique. Self-reflection is required in order to avoid bias. Controversy, on the other hand, is beneficial to the process— it helps delineate the steps towards the newly emerging theory. Therefore, the researcher must have good insight, avoid generalizations, and set any bias aside in order to produce accurate results.

My intention is to make a genuine theoretical contribution to the field of psychology. While reviewing the literature, I intend to expose different ways of understanding the topic. Lewis and Grimes (1999) report that “theorists iterate between reviewed literature, their multiparadigm analyses, and their own intuition to explore divergent views of themes that span paradigm accounts” (p.683). Eisenhardt (1989) said:
Theory-building research is begun as close as possible to the ideal of no theory under consideration and no hypotheses to test. Admittedly, it is impossible to achieve this ideal of a clean theoretical slate. Nonetheless, attempting to approach this ideal is important because preordained theoretical perspectives or propositions may bias and limit the findings. (p. 536)

This theoretical research will compare works of many experts in the topic discussed. Ultimately, the researcher is responsible for formulating a theory based on the comparisons between other theories. Eisenhardt (1989) points out that “Traditionally, authors have developed theory by combining observations from previous literature, common sense, and experience “(p.532). Lewis and Grimes (1999) explain that, while theorists must explore different views, their knowledge base becomes more complex, yet also more substantial and influential to the field. “Substantive knowledge produced from such efforts may be contextualized by local meanings and the paradigms explored, yet researchers' reflections on the bounds of their methods and understandings may become more abundant, candid, and legitimate” (p.686).

**Research Question**

This study will examine the experiences of women who were married to narcissistic men. The research question to guide this study is as follows: What did these women experience, and how are they ultimately affected by their experience in their marriage to a person with narcissist traits?
Chapter II Literature Review

The theories described in this literature review will provide a better understanding of how narcissism affects different aspects of relationships, in addition to the impact on the non-narcissistic partner. The first section focuses on the relationship, the second section on the narcissist (the man in literature cited), and the third section on the partner (the woman in literature cited). The objective is to create an integrative comprehensive theory based on all the findings.

Section 1: The Relationship in a Narcissistic Marital System

By listening to accounts by different women dealing with the same personality disorder in their spouses, one wonders if there are any patterns that will emerge, even though the details of their stories will be unique. McBride (2015) explains that “being in an intimate relationship with a narcissist can be exhilarating and all-consuming, but often, in the end, the narcissist consumes you, your hopes and dreams, your peace of mind, and your money” (p. 1). A person with healthy self-esteem has appropriate boundaries and will not tolerate abuse. So one essential question is: since this is a relational dynamic, how does the partner of the narcissist become so emotionally entangled to the point that they are making excuses for their partner’s abuse?

A better understanding of the dynamic in these relationships may be helpful to individuals who are, or have been, caught up in a toxic relationship with a narcissist in order to see how they arrived in a very difficult, dysfunctional dynamic. Grey (2013) went so far as to suggest that the bottom line is, “when the narcissist shows you who he really is, (blows hot and cold, future fakes, his words never match his actions, the relationship is all on his terms …) the woman with healthy self-esteem puts foot to
pavement and doesn’t look back” (para.2). Snyder and Whisman (2003) have interpreted this view:

> In the average courtship, a state of narcissistic overvaluation happens normally. People fall in love, and each thinks the other is wonderful. When one of the lovers is narcissistic, this state of finding the self and the other wonderful may be prolonged into the marriage to a ridiculous extent that does violence to the reality of the spouse, or it may give way to profound disappointment when expectations are not met. (p. 287)

In every relationship there is pressure between the needs of the self and the needs of the partner. Individuals at times become unaware of the needs of their partner, but through honest and open communication those needs may be verbalized and negotiated. A partner who feels safe to communicate, has better chances to problem solve together and come to a mutual understanding. On the contrary, narcissistic relationships are not often dealt with based on mutual understanding. Solomon (1992) explains that narcissist’s failure to have healthy interactions are due to lack of empathy and interest in understanding their partners. It is important to educate partners on how to respond to those with Narcissistic Personality Disorders, since it creates challenging barriers for effective communication, intimacy, and a healthy relationship. Campbell & Campbell (2009) said:

> Past studies have demonstrated a temporal effect for narcissism as measured by the NPI, such that individuals who are more narcissistic are perceived more positively by their partner at the beginning of the relationship, while over time this perception changes polarity to a more negative interpersonal experience
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It is critical for partners of narcissists to understand the reality they are dealing with because there really is no cure. Studies show that it is unlikely for narcissists to feel remorse (McBride, 2015; McWilliams, 1994). McWilliams (1994) explains “Sincere apologies and heartfelt thanks, the behavioral expressions of remorse and gratitude, may thus be avoided or compromised in narcissistic people” (p.178). This happens because they may feel vulnerable accepting the shame of such weak feelings.

Background of the problem

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said that, “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.” In the beginning of a relationship, narcissistic partners tend to make their partner feel special. They also try to portray their own character as being irresistible. Thus, many women fall for the charm and glitter of a fantasy-person, seeming too perfect to pass up (Berman, 2015). The first encounter with a narcissist is often impressive.

Berscheid and Reis (1998) added:

We assume that narcissism predicts all of the four relevant cue domains: attractiveness, from their flashy and neat attire; interpersonal warmth, from their charming glances at strangers; competence, from their self-assured behavior; and humor, from their witty verbal expressions, therefore, they enjoy greater initial popularity than non-narcissists. (p. 134)

A man’s popularity may actually get him many dates, but chances are, many women will not stick around once the negative narcissistic responses begin emerging in the form of extreme selfishness, and verbal, emotional and/or physical abuse. However, a
percentage of women will find themselves enmeshed in a cycle of abuse with a narcissist, desperately trying to figure out what is wrong. Since these traits usually emerge gradually in the relationship, it is possible some women become emotionally invested in the relationship before they learn about the negative traits of their partner. Campbell and Campbell (2009) suggest that:

Narcissistic individuals engage in behaviors that enhance their own self-concept with little care for consequences to others. This self-enhancement is especially strategic in the initial stages of a relationship, which is a period consisting of the greatest benefits and fewest costs for narcissistic individuals. Furthermore, narcissism is linked to using game-playing, which involves demonstrating inconsistent commitment to the relationship (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002) and predicts lower relationship satisfaction (Vedes et al., 2016). This love style involves switching unpredictably between attraction and aloofness, a pattern that can distress partners. Although the literature is still growing, narcissism (especially exploitativeness) appears to be related to better emotion recognition, which may contribute to more effective manipulation of others (Konrath, Corneille, Bushman, & Luminet, 2014), as cited in Lamkin, Lavner, Shaffer, 2017, p.227).

Emotionally bonded, many of the woman’s own personal issues such as issues of abandonment, might feed the dynamic perpetuating the toxic relationship. There comes a point when eventually the woman feels she can no longer be herself, but only who her narcissistic partner wants her to be. She will feel as if she is trapped, and in a sense, she is an emotional hostage. One wonders if the partners of narcissists suffer something similar
to Stockholm Syndrome, otherwise why do these women stay in these relationships that wound them so deeply?

Stockholm syndrome is a condition that causes hostages to develop a psychological alliance with their captors as a survival strategy during captivity. The bond created in certain relationships with narcissistic abuse is similar to this syndrome. The connection is created from trauma experienced, the feeling of being trapped, and becoming a hostage to the relationship. The woman’s ongoing caregiving, in order to maintain a steady narcissistic supply, a chronic need for gratification and recognition, helps the generation of the bond (Vaknin & Love, 2006). These feelings, resulting from a bond formed between captor and captive during intimate time spent together, are generally considered irrational in light of the danger or risk endured by the victims. Generally speaking, Stockholm Syndrome consists of "strong emotional ties that develop between two persons where one person intermittently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses, or intimidates the other (Wikipedia). According to Canonville (2016), anyone can become a victim of Stockholm Syndrome, and the four following conditions must be present:

1. That there is a perceived threat to the captive’s existence, and they believe that the captor will carry out that threat.
2. That the captor experiences small kindnesses from their captor within a context of terror.
3. That the captor is isolated from any other perspectives other than those of their captor.
4. That the captive perceives they have an inability to escape. (para. 5.)
The victims learn that they are in a hostile environment as they experience persistent threat to their psychological, physical, and emotional being. In many ways, it is similar to the effects of narcissistic abuse, in which the victim is unwilling to leave because she feels trapped. The victim can find no way to escape; therefore, the victim will respond with an adaptive behavior called cognitive dissonance in order to reduce stress (Cannonville, 2016). McLeod (2008) explains that “cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors. This produces a feeling of discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance etc.” (para. 1).

The victim lives in constant fear and even when everything is fine, she still experiences anxiety. She learns to focus on the narcissist’s needs instead of her own. Without a better way to explain narcissistic behaviors, these victims may find themselves in denial, explaining they are “in love” with their predators. Random acts of kindness and affection make the victim feel as if they are momentarily safe. Just as a predator in the wild loses interest in its prey if the prey plays dead or stops moving, the narcissist stops chasing (abusing) his victim if she gives in (accepts) and stops fighting back. The victims “will put themselves in such self-hypnotic trance of being in love with the abuser that they will defend their narcissistic persecutor to the outside world, and will even fight off attempts by others to rescue them” (Cannonville, 2016, para.11).

In domestic violence cases, this dynamic is often confusing to authorities. The victims often defend their abusers, even when the victim is clearly hurt. In some cases, the victims are the ones to pay for the bail bond to get their abusers back home. This type of domestic violence becomes intolerable when woman realizes she is putting her life or
her children’s lives in jeopardy. The accounts of these women become stories of guilt and shame, and they often do not have the answers as to why they stayed as long as they did. Kearney (1999) developed a model for recovery for the women who left their abusers, with three stages of the recovery phase: struggling for survival, grieving, and searching for meaning.

Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2001) describe Farrell’s (1996) study explaining that the healing process is “reconnecting the fragments of the self by putting the abuse experience into perspective and developing a sense of wholeness” (p.88). Once these women are able to leave, they find themselves judged and criticized by those around them who do not understand why they are not trying harder to save the relationship. Healing the trauma is done through a process of slow recovery. These women often want an explanation for themselves so that they can move forward and do not make the same mistake again. It seems common for the women entangled with a narcissist to become so diminished that they wonder how they can escape from their partner and move on.

According to Berman (2015), the narcissistic relationship changes completely in time and, in the process, the non-narcissistic partner disappears (para. 9). Women within these relationships thus seem to lose their identity over time, while for their narcissistic partners, loving someone and being in a committed relationship means being in control. According to Canonville (2016), the dysfunctional behavior of one with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, “involves such callous exploitation of their victims that it has given birth to a new condition known as Narcissistic Victim Syndrome (or Narcissistic Abuse Syndrome)” (para. 2). She sheds light on a pattern or cluster of symptoms in people who have been the victim of what is often termed, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Narcissistic Abuse
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(Forsyth, 1922). As usual, the narcissist gets all the attention and the partner perishes psychologically while living with nonsense and confusion.

**Culture and narcissism**

In general, the term narcissism is something people think of as a negative term depicting a person who is egotistic, selfish, vain, and has a grandiose self-image that is out of proportion with reality. There is evidence to suggest one’s birth era and the overall socio-cultural birth environment may influence the formation of healthy or unhealthy narcissistic traits (Twenge, 2002). Some have argued that the United States became more individualistic and self-focused during the 1970s. Baumeister (1997), argued that this trend toward individualism was pervasive, fostering narcissistic traits. However, the older generation, raised in more collectivistic times (e.g., the 1950s), was less likely to foster narcissistic traits. Experiencing a culture that serves the needs of the individual instead of a collective purpose is believed to lead young people to have more narcissistic traits.

Does narcissism change over the course of a lifetime? There are several conflicting studies regarding the matter. Generational changes in narcissism are speculated to be age related; the older someone becomes, the less narcissistic a person becomes (Roberts, Edmonds, and Grijalva, 2010). According to Schaie (1965) changes in personality over time are intrinsically interesting because they have the potential to demonstrate the effect of culture on personality development. Moreover, if psychologists are to understand and appreciate the meaning of changes in narcissism over time, comparing generations, personalities, and developmental aspects are all relevant. Although, pathological narcissism in full spectrum may not incorporate the major changes over a lifetime mentioned above, especially developmentally-speaking, the distinction between younger
people being more narcissistic than older people and younger people being more narcissistic than previous generations is probably too subtle to detect (Ozer, 1993).

Even though, in general, people frown on narcissism, today it certainly seems we live in a culture that paradoxically values narcissism. People’s cameras are turned towards themselves in the form of selfies. This century is a period of shameless self-promotion on social media. People seek affirmation and attention on the various social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram. They want to be liked—very often by people they hardly know. Sadly, teens have judged their self-worth and value based on how they are responded to or not responded to on these social media sites. Feelings of social media rejection have led some teens to extreme behaviors, even suicide.

Social media has changed the nature of human interactions. The way humans talk, and the way they relate to themselves is evolved. The literature shows that there is a sense of loneliness that goes ignored because those who use these sites believe they have dozens, perhaps hundreds of friends on social media. In reality, these individuals may not have enough friends to interact with, in person or otherwise, or may perhaps have no one to come to their aid when in need. The narcissist is attracted to social media and, conversely, social media may turn us inevitably into narcissists. (MacDonald, 2014). “Generation me is the new generation where people are more likely to think less about others, more about themselves, their image and fame” (Twenge, 2013, p.11).

“Generation me” is the new norm, with selfies, social media, the information society, and oversharing of information (Roberts et al., 2010). According to Twenge & Campbell (2010), social media is a gateway for self-promotion, creating multiple superficial relationships without the presence of empathy and warmth. As MacDonald
(2014) points out, there is a terrible cost to this false sense of self and causes real damage to young people. A new trend of false identity encourages participants to change identities online. The technological revolution has happened too fast for us, and we are all slaves in the technological age without understanding the long-term consequences (MacDonald, 2014).

This burden of having to create an image for the public is unique to our times and promotes catering to the urges of the outside world to feed our sense of self-esteem. It must be noted that self-esteem is an inside-out job, not an outside-in job. If people do not feel good about themselves without the constant affirmation of the world around them, self-esteem will be fragile and subject to the unstable tyranny of public opinion. Self-esteem will become attached to things outside personal control, rather than rooted within the individual. The current selfie culture is baiting people to seek attention and affirmation from the outside world and, in a sense, to be narcissists on some level. And yet the idea of self-absorption so deep that it creates great anxiety is not a modern day phenomenon. Greek mythology gives the root of the word narcissism with the myth of Narcissus.

**Myth of Narcissus**

The concept of narcissism has been around for over two thousand years, originating from Ovid’s romanticized Greek legend of Narcissus, a man who was in love with his image reflected in a lake. His obsession with the person in the reflection was so intense that he was incapable of loving another person (MacDonald, 2014). Thus Narcissus’ excessive self-love was accompanied by a lack of empathy for others that impaired his ability to become intimate, and he was unable to connect with anyone outside himself.
The Narcissus myth is described by Ovid as:

All that is lovely in himself he loves, and in his witless way he wants himself: he who approves is equally approved; he seeks, is sought, he burns and he is burnt. And how he kisses the deceitful fount; and how he thrusts his arms to catch the neck that's pictured in the middle of the stream! He knows not what he there beholds, but what he sees inflames his longing, and the error that deceives allures his eyes. But why, O foolish boy, so vainly catching at this flitting form? The cheat that you are seeking has no place. Avert your gaze and you will lose your love, for this that holds your eyes is nothing save the image of yourself reflected back to you. It comes and waits with you; it has no life; it will depart if you will only go. (Ovid, 1922, p. 407, as cited in Becker, 1977)

Narcissus met a tragic fate; he drowned staring into his own reflection in a lake (Hughes, 1997). The anxiety and stress Narcissus experiences when his image gets muddled and vanishes can be likened to the panic experienced by persons with Narcissistic Personality Disorder when their self-esteem is threatened, which occurs often because their self-image and esteem are based on conditions outside of their control. Psychologists have suitably used this myth as a metaphor for a person whose self-absorption, arrogant behavior, and egotism effectively kills their relationships with others, thus destroying their ability to be loved by others, in turn. This symbolic figure portrays the image of an interpersonal dysfunction carried on by narcissists.

The myth of Narcissus and Echo:

One day, when she observed Narcissus wandering in the pathless woods, she loved him and she followed him, with soft and stealthy tread. Oh, how she longed to
make her passion known! Presently the youth, by chance divided from his trusted
friends, cries loudly, “Who is here?” and Echo, “Here!” Replies. Amazed, he casts
his eyes around, and calls with louder voice, “Come here!” “Come here!” She calls
the youth who calls. He turns to see who calls him and, beholding naught exclaims,
“Avoid me not!” “Avoid me not!” returns. He tries again, again, and is deceived by
this alternate voice, and calls aloud; “Oh let us come together!” Echo cries, “Oh let
us come together!” He flies from her and as he leaves her says, “Take off your
hands! You shall not fold your arms around me. Better death than such a one
should ever caress me!” Naught she answers save, “Caress me!” Thus rejected she
lies hid in the deep woods. But her great love increases with neglect; her miserable
body wastes away, wakeful with sorrows (Ovid, 1922, p. 370).

**Narcissism today**

Twenge & Campbell (2009) argue that personality is not developed in isolation; the
culture has a great influence on the process. “Americans are being persuaded that
becoming vain, materialistic, and self-centered is actually a good thing. This can happen
even if you’re not particularly narcissistic but just get drawn into what everyone else is
doing” (p.39). The new generation of youth feel as if being self-centered is acceptable in
order to succeed in life, necessary in this competitive market. Even President Trump
stated, “Show me someone without an ego, and I’ll show you a loser” (p.41). Blackburn
(2014) suggested:

It is time to confess that narcissists are frequently charming. He sets out to be,
since he has learned that this is the surest way to harvest good opinion, or at least
the appearance of it. And his apparent self-confidence is infectious (p.67).
Twenge & Campbell (2009) report that all of this self-confidence may eventually backfire, because narcissists love to be ahead, they are incapable of accepting making mistakes. “Narcissists are lousy at taking criticism and learning from their mistakes. They also like to blame everyone and everything except themselves for their shortcomings” (p.42).

Narcissists have a high affinity for taking risks. They are confident in that whatever they do will go well. That is why they do so well at investments. They take more risks than the average person. Narcissism and overconfidence go hand in hand, although research in narcissism and judgment shows that, in the end, a narcissists’ overconfidence undermines their performance (p.44). They do not make good bosses because of their lack of interpersonal skills and empathy. When they are recognized for their success, they try even harder to perform better (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). They do better at personal achievements than at group or team work. While working in teams, narcissists “often take advantage of their teammates in their attempts to succeed at all costs. ‘They are the ‘‘glory hogs’’, ‘suck-ups’’, or ‘backstabbers’’ – people who get ahead at the expense of others and jeopardize the success of the organization” (p. 239). They enjoy taking all the credit for work that they merely contributed to. Blackburn noted:

A grandiose yet vulnerable self-concept…underlies the chronic goal of obtaining continuous external self-affirmation. Because narcissists are insensitive to others’ concerns and social constraints and view others as inferior, self-regulatory effort often are counterproductive and ultimately prevent the positive feedback that they seek – thus undermining the self that they are trying to create and maintain (p.63).
At this point in time, our society feels compelled to fight for our collective well-being, since our future generations depend on what we do today. A sense of entitlement by individuals is detrimental to our society as a whole. The diminishing of our resources is an example of how much collective thinking is important to our survival. Narcissists have difficulty thinking collectively, and that is simply because they care less about the wellbeing of others. “Entitled people feel it is right to take more stuff from the world, whether it’s fish or fuel. If more people feel that way, the resources will run out, leaving nothing for future generations” (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 240)

Research has shown that the more failure people experience, the less narcissistic they might become. Young people have not experienced much failure, while older people have, and thus they should be less narcissistic (Ozer & Gjerde, 1989). In today’s western society, a full-blown narcissistic personality diagnosis is rare, but narcissistic traits are still common (MacDonald, 2014). According to Pinsky (2006), traits such as, vanity, arrogance, feeling special, and having little regard for others are a part of our everyday lives. These traits are attributed not to parental failure to nurture the needs of the child, but to cultural changes in society in this age of entitlement (Twenge & Campbell, 2010). The trend toward self-entitlement helps promote the self-image of individuals compared to their peers; this is true for youth, in particular, where extra confidence helps raise their importance in the eyes of others. Thus narcissistic traits inherited through one’s culture may not always correspond to having Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD).

According to research by Twenge & Campbell (2009), self-admiration by the young generation in America has risen more rapidly than in the previous generations (e.g. baby boomers). Twenge & Campbell (2009) revealed that this youth generation is 30%
more narcissistic than in the last two decades. “One out of four recent college students answered the majority of questions in the narcissistic direction” (p.30). The change in increase is higher for women, but in general, men still score higher than women. “Over the last few decades, narcissism has risen as much as obesity. In other words, the narcissism epidemic is just as widespread as the obesity epidemic” (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 31).

Till death do us part

The reason most men and women seek fulfillment through relationships may be because it is a way to fulfill a myth for true lasting love. We are emotionally prone to seeking happiness in our partnerships. Social connections make us stronger as individuals. We learn to mimic behaviors as early infants in order to fit into society as adults. We are social beings; even without making connections through romance, we need to have people we relate to in our lives. Some of our emotional needs are expressed in the quest for the perfect mate. It is important to remember that the first attempt may not necessary work out; therefore everyone has the right and obligation to keep looking (Solomon, 1992). The goal becomes to find that perfect mate for life.

Jessie Bernard (1972, p.17) have pointed out as quoted in Solomon 1992, (p.14). “Men choose to be married because on almost every index – demographic, psychological, or social, married men do better than unmarried men, they suffer from fewer mental health impairments, have lower suicide rate and lower death from illnesses”. (p.14)

If an individual is vulnerable and often hurt, he may seek to heal his wounds in a relationship. Solomon, (1992) points out that “Pathological interactions are characterized by repeated failure to recognize the feelings and needs of an intimate other or by an
Partners need to feel safe with one another and not need to protect themselves against getting hurt. Solomon (1992) says, “They lose the fear that what will spontaneously emerge is dangerous, damaging, or destructive to themselves, others, or the relationship” (p.57). Once the guards are down, the individual accepts the relationship as a safe haven. Partners are meant to mature in the relationship at the same level, learning about one another and adapting their ways to make the partnership a mutually pleasant experience. At times, conflicts arise during a normal pattern of adjustment. The narcissistic needs may accidentally be translated into neglect, such as Solomon’s (1992) example of the husband who was working overtime and neglecting his family, even though he felt he was doing the best for his family. The family did not perceive it that way; they believed he did not care enough for them. This case is a simple example of the narcissistic thinking that the narcissist always knows best for his family.

In the many cases of conflict experienced in a marriage, most are reparable. The ability to communicate to one’s partner what is really bothering one, and on the other hand, the receptiveness of hearing and trying to understand a complaint, can lead to fixing the damage. Unfortunately, these patterns of communication are set early on in the relationship. Often times the couple is able to compromise, even through conflicts, in order to keep the peace. The injuries that are long lasting are the ones that affect one’s sense of self, the injuries that are inflicted on one’s soul. Once a partner is unable to have her voice heard or make any compromise that would keep the peace, the relationship starts to become unbalanced. If neither partner knows how to change the patterns of conflict, seeking help is crucial. Partners may resist resolving the triggers that lead to
conflict because they fear that divorce is not a safe option. Therefore, couples perpetuate the failures to fix things, in a spiral of collusion. Solomon (1992) describes this pattern as “The unknown dread is more terrifying than known discontent” (p.60).

The lack of mutual appreciation in the partnership leads to disappointment, leaving the non-narcissistic partner isolated and unhappy. The emotional injuries caused by the perpetuation of failed attempts can bring her to lose a sense of what is her own purpose in life; she becomes a slave to the relationship and to her partner (Solomon, 1992). Snyder & Whisman (2003) noted:

When a narcissist marries, the chosen spouse is up against a formidable challenge. He or she is likely to feel frustrated by the elusiveness of the perfect butterfly that is promised but never emerges. Narcissistic people have great difficulty in achieving intimate relationships, because they do not relate to their partners as people having needs and personality attributes (p.287).

In a narcissistic marital system, life becomes a puzzle, where the woman is, often times, trying to find where the next piece will fit. It becomes her job to balance all the aspects of their lives to please her partner’s expectations. She is often confused by what behavior has caused the conflict. The daily routine is completely abnormal; it is a challenge having to keep looking for flaws (often unnoticed by her partner) in order to fix them before the partner finds them himself. More confusing even is the daily reaction from the partner. The non-narcissistic partner can never guess what kind of day the narcissist had, and this can make all the difference. The behavior of the narcissist is never predictable, because there are so many factors that could influence his mood. The spouse
at home is only hoping for the best outcome, but smiles and kisses cannot influence a change in mood after a bad day at the office.

Narcissists carry their own weather with them, a beautiful day can be gloomy as, if they experienced any criticism or failure at work. The spouse at home is the one to take the blame and verbal abuse. Without much explanation, she would be left with wild guesses as to what triggered his negative behavior. On the other hand, if a good day was experienced, she may even get flowers for no apparent reason. It will all depend on the outcome of those 6-8 hours outside of the home. A good day means a great reception, with perhaps a celebratory mood, which makes up for those gloomy days that she had to endure.

Narcissistic traits may also emerge in later years as full blown NPD when the “declining mental ability and physical competence puncture grandiosity and the required admiration is harder to attract” (Snyder & Whisman, 2003, p.285). This may prove to be more challenging for the non-narcissistic partner to stay in the relationship. Dealing with aging and less support decreases the chance to tolerate the bad behavior.

**Dancing with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**

The narcissist will pretend to be what he is not and will work his charm to prove he is great. Once he has attracted a partner to his inner circle, he will keep playing games and toying with his partner emotionally, because that is all he is capable of. Wurst et al. (2016) aimed to isolate factors that contribute to the reasons that narcissists tend to be successful romantically in dating during the early phases, but fail miserably in long-term committed relationships. Why is there such a divergence in relation to the length of the relationship? The factors that Wurst et al. (2016) looked at are narcissistic admiration and
Basically, the narcissist seeks social admiration to promote a positive view of himself and does this assertively by being expressive, extroverted, charming, and dominant. These qualities are attractive to the opposite sex and he is perceived as good mate material. However, the other narcissistic process of rivalry is antagonistic, whereby he props himself up at other people’s expense. Some of these rivalry behaviors include devaluation of others and revenge-orientation, which will then erode his longer term relationships. Wurst et al. (2016) hypothesize “that the diverging romantic outcomes can be explained as a consequence of differential associations with these two dimensions (p.281).”

Research findings (Wurst et al.) show that the narcissist is very successful in getting dates and attracting romantic partners. Higher scores in narcissism correlate with more sexual affairs and dating partners. This is attributed to the romantically attractive characteristics associated with narcissism, such as attention to their physical appearance, high confidence, and little fear of romantic rejection. All this makes it easier for the narcissist to connect on a superficial level and to sell himself in the initiation phase of dating. If one thinks of dating as a marketing campaign, then, perhaps the narcissist has mastered this part of the romantic connection. However, in long term relationships the narcissist’s other mode of operation, rivalry, takes over. Once the initiation phase, or marketing campaign, characterized by the admiration dimension of narcissism ends, then the rivalry begins. Anyone who sticks around will start finding themselves on the receiving end of the rivalry dimension of narcissism. This is when the selfishness and aggressive behavior becomes apparent. The narcissist and his partner will fail to achieve
intimacy, love and trust, and are doomed to have a very low level of relationship satisfaction. It is this dimension of rivalry that these researchers believe is the root problem in long-term romantic relationships with narcissists (Wurst et al.). Lamkin, Lavner, Shaffer (2017), said:

Narcissism is associated with dysfunction in interpersonal relationships, including causing pain and suffering in close others (Miller, Campbell, & Pilkonis, 2007). In the context of romantic relationships, narcissism has been consistently associated with negative consequences for romantic partners when measured at a trait-based level (Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Lavner, Lamkin, Miller, Campbell, & Karney, 2016) (p.224).

Thus, a relationship with a narcissist has a very distinct pattern, going from an exciting romance thanks to the narcissist’s high admiration efforts (assertive self-enhancement), to extreme disillusionment and disappointment because of the rivalry (antagonistic self-protection) mode of relating to those who stick around long enough to be a threat to his ego (Wurst et al., 2016). Peterson and DeHart (2014) demonstrated that “narcissistic individuals were more likely to engage in hostility (e.g., criticism, insults) when discussing a conflict with their partner” (cited in Lamkin, Lavner, Shaffer, 2017, p. 224).

In his chocolate cake model, Campbell (2005) compared engaging in a romantic relationship with a narcissistic partner to eating a chocolate cake: “an initial rush of excitement and positive feelings one cannot resist, followed by long-term costs and regret that outweigh the initial pleasure” (p.282).

Short term trysts and hook ups do not require people to look beyond the surface,
 ROLE OF NARCISSISM IN RELATIONSHIPS

and the narcissist is all about putting on a good appearance for the outside world. He is extremely concerned with how the outside world perceives him, and hence the narcissist scores high in the dimension of admiration (assertive self-enhancement). The narcissist is threatened when he is in a long-term committed relationship because this effort of assertive self-enhancement cannot work for long periods of time. After all, appearances can only be kept up for outsiders. Once another person is on the inside of his world, he must resort to rivalry (antagonistic self-protection) (Wurst et al., 2016). The narcissist basically sees his partner as a threat which he must constant control, and he does this through derogation, exploitation, insensitiveness, and aggressive behavior. His personality disorder is akin to an emotional minefield, and his partner will inadvertently set off the mines. This is the walking on eggshells phenomenon the women describe that make them feel afraid and paralyzes them after a while.

Individuals with narcissistic traits are very sensitive to disapproval. Thus they take everything a partner says very personally. The need for constant approval becomes hostile territory. As Berman (2015) describes, a partner may feel as if she is constantly “tiptoeing around a minefield”. Anything she says may trigger anger and disapproval. She has to be watchful for any communication that can set her partner off, and in time they become emotionally distraught. The partner loses sight of where she ends and where he starts (Berman, 2015). A partner fades away, losing her own identity in time. The narcissist will be very manipulative, occasionally, being the nice man again because he will want to keep his partner around because he really does not want to lose the fuel to his narcissistic supply. Other characteristics in line with this rivalry dimension are low ability to forgive and vengeful reactions. The vengeful reactions may be a factor in her fear of
leaving her narcissistic partner.

From this study, and also from the accounts of women, one can see that in a romantic relationship with a narcissist, the trajectory extends from a romantic fantasy to a nightmare rapidly. The severity of the situation depends on a lot of factors: the degree of narcissistic abuse and the degree to which the partner triggers his rivalry response, as well as how much the partner has invested herself in the relationship before seeing this side of her narcissistic mate is also a factor in determining the acerbity of the circumstance.

Although Wurst et al.(2016) did not fully reach a conclusion, another question this study raises is the narcissist’s partner’s failure to fully vet whether someone is really good mate material. They state, “For example, individuals who initially choose their romantic partners primarily on the basis of partner characteristics that become important in the long run (e.g., warmth, caring, and support) might develop more successful (i.e., longer lasting and more satisfying) romantic relationships (p.298).” From this perspective, the partner has no one to blame for being with a mean-spirited, uncaring, unloving narcissist but herself.

One wonders if there are superficial qualities the women of these partners are drawn to, or if there are other deeper “survival” reasons keeping these women from moving on, in spite of the low level of relationship satisfaction. Is it really possible to love another and have such a low level of relationship satisfaction? Is it love? Or is the partner attached to some aspect of the relationship, at the expense of her own happiness: i.e., good looks, status, wealth, notoriety, intelligence, and success. Do children keep her in the relationship because of cultural expectations of staying married in spite of the pain
it may cause? There are many reasons to ask why these women either might not want to leave, or want to leave but feel trapped.

**Could it be love?**

It is difficult to understand what feelings are involved in the beginning of a relationship with a narcissist. It seems most women would agree that they felt it was true love. They felt understood and cared for, and the long talks and romantic walks helped them to feel truly connected to their partners at first. Eventually the day comes when these same women feel as if they have a different partner altogether, causing surreal confusion. They seem to believe initially that the relationship between herself and the narcissist was real and intensely captivating. The narcissist, also, may have sincerely felt that way, but it was a vulnerable place to be, and therefore, unsafe territory. Behary (2013) refers to the fear of being vulnerable: “The truth is that he actually longs for a deeper and much more profound connection – a need that he simply cannot realize, comprehend, or accept” (p.17). The idea of an emotional connection sounds like a place of weakness, which needs to be avoided at all times by the narcissist. Solomon (1992) said:

> Because they are exquisitely sensitive to failures, disappointments, and slights, those with false selves have learned to submerge feelings and put their emotional energy into developing relationships in which they can maintain an illusion of loving and being loved by others. (p.32)

Being in a relationship with a narcissist may be experienced as love and appreciation at times, yet according to McBride (2015), true narcissists are not able to love. Narcissists are unable to form a “sense of relatedness” (Solomon, 1992, p. 32). McBride (2015)
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posits that love requires tuning into one another; it requires a heartfelt intention to bond, which is absent in the narcissist. To the narcissistic individual’s defense, they simply do not know how to make the connection; it is an impaired ability; experiencing little interest in getting to truly know a partner on a deeper level.

A non-narcissistic partner, on the other hand, may be deeply connected and truly in love. At first, a connection with a narcissist tends to be an experience so intense that it leaves one living in a dream which becomes confusing when that love is not reciprocated later on. The partner’s love for a narcissist may be enough to maintain the relationship, often augmented by the woman’s fear of being alone, or even rejected.

Even if narcissists say that they would like to feel more positive emotion, they do not know how. At times they do manage to make their partners feel special and experience loving moments, as Behary (2013) describes, “they can be someone who captures your heart in brief moments when his vulnerability and humanness manage to sneak out of the imprisonment of ego to occasionally show up as warm and caring – if only for a little while” (p.4). Solomon (1992) explains that narcissists, “Because they are generally desirous of maintaining their relationships, however disappointing, they often willingly, but with trepidation, enter into and continue marital therapy in an attempt to repair whatever is wrong” (p.32).

Redefining aggression

Aggressive behavior is common in the narcissistic marital system. Glickauf-Hughes and Wells (1996) stated that “The narcissistic spouse often carries the aggressive rage in a couple, while the masochistic partner carries the sadness” (p.525). According to the study done by Baumeister, Bushman and Campbell (2000), egocentrism and
narcissism both carry destructive patterns of behavior from partners who are unable to establish a connection with others. These patterns of behavior are related to the narcissist’s highly positive view of the self; when that view is threatened, questioned, or contradicted, the chances of aggression are escalated (Baumeister, 1997). When spouses do not play the role of enhancing the narcissist’s self, that spouse becomes the ego-threatener. Narcissists self-enhance, while non-narcissists enhance others (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000). This self-serving attribution, when not played correctly, is significantly related to aggression in narcissists. This reflects the rivalry aspect mentioned previously.

The aggression is not always portrayed lucidly; it may manifest in small insults, criticism, and verbal attacks that seem harmless over time. There is also another side of the trait: the narcissistic rage, which is characterized by “severe hostility, the need for revenge, and extreme lack of empathy towards the spouse” (Feldman, 1982, p. 419). According to Feldman (1982), this destructive marital conflict consists of verbal assaults (generalized criticism, character assassination, sarcasm, insults, etc.), and may end with physical violence (p. 420). Dickinson and Pincus (2003) also describe that “the disavowal of the narcissist’s own entitled expectations leads to brewing anger and hostile outbursts” (p. 189). The hostility may appear in the form of constant avoidance or neglect, leaving the non-narcissistic partner to experience prolonged loneliness. The narcissistic spouses with egotistic characteristics experience challenged lack of empathy; therefore, a deeper marital connection is almost impossible. Vaknin (2016) said:

Narcissists can be imperturbable, resilient to stress, and sangfroid. Narcissistic rage is not a reaction to stress – it is a reaction to a perceived slight, insult,
criticism, or disagreement (in other words, to narcissistic injury). It is intense and disproportional to the “offense”. Raging narcissists usually perceive their reaction to have been triggered by an intentional provocation with a hostile purpose. Their targets, on the other hand, invariably regard raging narcissists as incoherent, unjust, and arbitrary. Narcissistic rage should not be confused with anger, though they have many things in common. (para. 10-11)

Evans (2009) describes in detail several patterns of verbal abuse which occur. It is common knowledge that abusers seek control over their victims. Sometimes spouses have been in the same controlled situation for years. The woman might tolerate in silence until the abuse becomes unbearable. Quite often the victims of this type of abuse do not see themselves as victims. Evans (1992) encourages spouses of abusive partners to recognize the fact that they are in an abusive relationship if they feel disempowered, disrespected, or devaluated, by the words or attitude of their spouses.

Partners who experience psychological abuse find themselves trapped and powerless. “When an abuser is in a self-absorbed reality, making the partner suffer gives him a sense of power” (Evans, 1992, p. 98). Communicating with a narcissist may trigger anger if one disagrees with his opinion. The narcissist may be easily injured if one questions his perfect taste for movies, and may judge the non-narcissistic partner as having a flaw in her thinking process. Consequently, she may start to doubt her own intelligence. One common and disregarded behavior that leaves the partner feeling disrespected is the lack of response from the narcissist. Women describe feeling awful simply by being deprived of a response to a question they present, which may happen repeatedly, and they are left feeling ignorant and unimportant. Something as trivial as
feedback on a movie may cause hostility from the narcissist if anyone disagrees with his opinion. Over time, the couple may stop interacting all together.

A common example of subtle abuse is name calling, which is a common form of insult by narcissists. Comments that undermine a partner’s opinion, for example, can damage her sense of wellbeing and self-esteem over time. Undermining a partner causes her to feel inadequate and diminished. Constant criticism in small doses can destroy self-esteem; and the narcissist employs criticism consistently. Partners in such cases have difficulty finding ways to be appreciated by their abusers. As Evans points out:

Becoming the best listener, understanding, supportive, more fun, or any other traits that they think are going to help does not change the fact that the abuser is not going to change. The abuser’s anger arises out of his general sense of personal powerlessness...He expresses his anger either covertly through subtle manipulation or overtly in unexpected outbursts directed at his partner (Evans, 1992, p.106).

Anger is a major tool for abusive spouses in general, because they are sometimes habituated to anger. As a partner gets used to the abuse and learns to cope with it, the abuser may increase his pressure, increasing his anger and hostility. The necessity to feel a sense of power, characteristic of narcissists, is one reason abusers do not apologize. They may lose that power by apologizing, therefore giving up their strength (Evans, 1992). Spouses often try to understand and look for rational reasons for the narcissist’s bad behavior. They are usually frightened and confused by the irrationality of their spouse’s behavior (Evans, 1992, p.110). Vaknin (2016) found that:

Most narcissists are prone to be angry. Their anger is always sudden, raging, frightening and without an apparent provocation by an outside agent. It would seem
that narcissists are in a *constant* state of rage, which is effectively controlled most of the time. It manifests itself only when the narcissist’s defenses are down, incapacitated, or adversely affected by circumstances, inner or external (para. 28).

In abusive relationships, partners are commonly conditioned by their repeated bad experiences which leaves her caught in the cycle of violence by the use of rewards, presents and honeymoon periods, often followed by another abusive episode. These rapid changes from rational to irrational behavior only increase confusion, as partners learn helplessness. A need for connection leads them to comply with their unpredictable partners, thus they become brainwashed, invalidating their own reality to please their narcissistic partners, or to avoid scorn; and then the woman disappears inward. She loses her identity, leaving no potential to feel loved or to thrive.

The deterioration of a marriage due to abusive behavior by narcissists may bring not only loneliness but also terror. “Feelings of being unwanted, unneeded, alienated and isolated” from one’s spouse, affect their wellbeing in all aspects of their lives (Rokach & Brock, 1997, p. 23). Once there is enough awareness to help identify such behaviors early in marriage, those women may be able to avoid the abuse and find ways to change the dynamic of their narcissistic relationships. If nothing else, they may voluntarily seek help and avoid hardship.

**Malignant Love**

Mahari (2015) states that a male with NPD is not necessarily a misogynist, but that differentiating narcissist abuse from misogyny is difficult. Kernberg (1974) also suggests that “a narcissistic person perhaps has an innately strong aggressive drive, which fuels this internal pressure of affect” (as cited in Dougherty & West, 2007, p. 67). Every
woman a man with NPD tries to be close to will mirror the same deficient mother/child connection that created his negative, hateful response towards women. Thus, his hatred towards the mother who abandoned him emotionally (whether intentionally or not) will be reflected in his hatred of all women. Hence, there is much overlap of behaviors exhibited by misogynists and males with NPD. The main thrust is to point out that women who love these men are in a losing battle, as these men are unlikely to ever change due to the nature of the disorder. Mahari (2015) said:

A Narcissistic Personality Disordered misogynist male has no reference or understanding relationally or cognitively for self-versus other. No mutuality. No reciprocity. He captures others, the woman, and she becomes an extension of himself…. The Narcissistic Personality Disordered misogynist borders if not teeters across the line into fitting some or most of the criteria of a psychopath as well in more cases than not” (para. 19).

Mahari (2015) pointed out that misogynists hate women from deep within their subconscious and that treating women badly actually releases dopamine in their brains, which makes them feel better. These men are chemically rewarded for being abusive. They are not aware that they hate women, but are operating from a trauma formed around a female figure from their early life.

The bottom line is that this type of man is not fixable and he will never be emotionally available. Mahari (2015) said women in these relationships experience a form of torture. She describes eight types of abuse tactics by such men in detail, so that women may recognize the abuse for what it is. The abuse ranges from verbal put downs, endless amateur psychoanalysis, intimidation, to gaslighting (manipulating someone by
questioning their sanity), bullying and violence, to stalking, should one try to break away. In retrospect, if a therapist meets a couple in therapy where this may be the scenario, it would be important to talk to the woman individually. The therapist should make time for each party involved to share their side of things in private, free from intimidation from a partner. Although Mahari did not describe Narcissitic Abuse Syndrome specifically, the author describes a “cognitive dissonance” these women experience that is debilitating, leaving them frozen in a place between fright and flight (Festinger, 1962). It seems, because the narcissist is cunning that the therapist must be very careful to rule out narcissistic abuse syndrome when it comes to couples counseling. At the end of the day, there is no amount of counseling that can make a relationship with a malignant narcissist a worthwhile pursuit.

Mahari (2015) demonstrated that many women who get caught up with such men “have often learned an enmeshed, insecure, codependent style of relating to emotionally unavailable and self-absorbed fathers first, and men partners secondly” (para. 11). Therefore, women who stay with these men must come to understand that the wound in them is what keeps them hoping for the impossible. Though the author points out that the most toxic situation occurs when a Borderline woman partners with an NPD male, it is not the case that all women enmeshed with an NPD males are Borderline.

Mahari (2015) states that women who knowingly stay with those who do not reciprocate love can benefit much from therapy, exploring “what happened in their families of origin that has led them to attach and/or trauma-bond to such abusive men” (para. 6). There is something clearly within them that avoids the healing light and keeps them in these painful relationships where they are not valued. These toxic relationships
are the unconscious reenactments of deep relational patterns established in childhood. “In psychology this is referred to as Object Other relations…[they] experience each other as the Object representation of Mother or Father and in many cases, both” (para. 12)

Mahari (2015) presents no hope for any relationship with a malignant misogynist male. The big question is: how on earth does a therapist navigate this delicate ground, without outright saying, “Your boyfriend or husband is a malignant narcissist and there is no hope, because he will never love you, because he is not capable of love in any normal sense, and you are always going to suffer with this man in your life. Get out while you can!” The author states quite bleakly, “if you are a woman with such a ‘person’ … the only thing that can help you heal and find yourself again is not only leaving him, getting away, but going absolutely no contact before you lose yourself…. (para. 31). Ironically, here, it seems the goal of couples therapy would be to help bring on the actual end of the coupling, so that any victim of abuse arrives at a safe harbor.

Behary (2013) who worked with a couple where the man was a narcissist, describes the end of her first session working as mediator:

I vividly remember the snapshot of my unease – my skin temperature rising, my heart rate increasing, my stomach knotting. A love of words, decent communication skills, and a chronic fascination with the human condition – all were silenced by an unfamiliar and shaky sensation of loss of confidence. It was as if that client had stomped out my spunk and compromised my courage (p.7).

It is common knowledge amongst therapists that a narcissist is simply the type of client they prefer not to see, in particular for the reasons described above. A therapist once mentioned to me that the best way to deal with a narcissist is to refer out.
The prognosis for a narcissistic marital system

Is an end to the nightmare possible? Part of the challenge is the couple actually understanding the nature of the challenge to begin with. People in these relationships often do not realize what is causing the dysfunction. The narcissist does not know he has NPD. Maybe the woman has been reading about it, because she has been suffering, and suspects he may have NPD. But it is not as if she is outright going to tell him. And neither is the therapist going to be able to outright say it either, nor could it be heard. When a couple in this system presents, it is because the victim is feeling the effects of the syndrome caused by her experiencing the narcissistic defenses of her partner. Narcissistic defenses such as projection, blame, withdrawal, and rage are common, and significantly affect any communication and problem resolution (Bland, 2010). In a marriage, communication is key to a successful relationship. This communication deficiency in NPD makes it very challenging to develop and maintain a marital life, where mutuality is vital. Reciprocity is at the heart of any healthy relationship, so it is a huge issue because the narcissist only cares about his needs. Ream (2010) mentions because of the “adrenaline rush” during the attraction phase in relationships, “it is easy to delude ourselves into believing that a partner can and will be able to build the kind of loving, committed relationship that most of us want” (para. 12). Snyder & Whisman (2003) suggest:

A person with a secure self brings substance to the couple relationship. He does not lose his individuality and yet he adapts to the personality of the woman he loves. A person with a narcissistic self is both insecure and self-sufficient. This interferes with bonding and intimacy in marriage. When the couple seeks therapy,
the narcissistic state complicates the establishment of a therapeutic alliance (p.288).

Ream (2010) recommends deep intimate, open and honest discussions between couples in order to determine whether they are “genuinely capable of building a healthy reciprocal relationship” (para. 12). Partners of narcissists have communicated the lure of the exciting courtship only to be severely let down later when the narcissist becomes cruel and condescending. In a sense, these women were deluded, but in holding onto the relationship, they failed to hold the narcissist accountable for his lack of reciprocity (Ream, 2010). We know that the narcissist is deficient in reciprocity, as it is one of the traits of the disorder. We can see the importance of reciprocity to healthy relating in confronting the narcissist’s inability to reciprocate, and the very damaging effect on the relationship. With no reciprocity, staying with a narcissist may unwittingly turn the partner into a martyr and a masochist.

The narcissist’s need for recognition and attention overcomes his ability to empathize with others or attend to his partner’s needs. Thus, too much energy and time is placed on prioritizing the narcissistic person’s needs, and any unattended narcissistic needs for validation and recognition are immaturesly demanded of the partner over time (Bland, 2010). The partner learns to merely provide a secure environment where the narcissist may enact his behavior; accepting the new role of a deprived self as fate. Thus Bland (2010) notes that “Given the complexity of many marital cases, it is essential that we understand not only the relational dysfunction, but how each partner’s self-functioning contributes to the chaos and stuck-ness couples often feel when they present for treatment” (p.158). In the absence of a supporting environment, spouses in these
situations may become frustrated, deprived, and lose their sense of autonomy. In time, this may trigger long lasting depression.

Another characteristic of narcissistic relationships is that one partner often tries to control and dictate the dynamic of the relationship. As a result, the spouse feels she has to fulfill her partner’s narcissistic needs and not have her own needs or behavior respected (Maltas, 1991). Trivial behaviors such as choosing a movie without previously consulting the spouse’s choice, ordering food without discussing options, disregarding a spouse’s overall priorities, avoiding the spouse’s family and their gatherings, and isolating the couple away from their friends are all part of the controlling demeanor. So, imagine the challenge this poses to the therapeutic environment; the narcissist wants to control the therapy as well. Consider the case study presented later, how the woman said her partner tried to direct the therapist into focusing on her taking responsibility. Because of concern about her partner’s emerging dark side, the woman decided she wanted to stop being intimate. However, he was always pushing that boundary, and in therapy he insisted that it was not right for his partner to do that. The therapist continued trying to redirect him by asking him how he was going to take care of himself in light of the boundary, but he just kept blaming the woman for the existence of the boundary.

A consequence of an intimate partner relationship where emotional safety is jeopardized may be long-term loss of individuality. Couples identified with narcissistic vulnerability are highly susceptible to disappointment, blaming, experiencing patterns of negative communication, and withdrawal—all proven to deteriorate the marriage over time (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Siegel, 2006). In order to come out of such an enmeshed bond, the victim must rediscover herself once again. In some
circumstances, divorce may be the only alternative. Between the losses of individualism within the marriage and the lack of a true self, she may find deserting a narcissistic partner—and recovering from the damaging relationship—a long and difficult process.

The risk of marriage distress varies according to the duration of marriage, narcissistic or not, where 30% of divorces happen during the first 4 years of marriage (Clarke, 1995). If there were ways to predict divorce, most likely many people would not pursue marriage. “Previous work has examined the predictive utility of personality variables, partner interactions, and appraisals of the marriage” (Kurdek, 2002). Kurdek mentions that in dating or marital relationships, people assume that their partner values them as much (or as little) as they value themselves. This belief raises expectations that are often unrealistic and disappointing.

**To be or not to be in the relationship?**

In 1904, Rainer Maria Rilke said:

For one human being to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all the other work is merely preparation…Loving does not at first mean merging, surrendering, and uniting with another person (for what would a union be of two people who are unclarified, unfinished, and still incoherent?); it is a high inducement for the individual to ripen, to become something in himself…to become a world in himself for the sake of another person.

When one is in a relationship with a narcissist, a person feels rarely loved, appreciated, and accepted, which leads a partner to believe she is not good enough. As
McBride (2015) describes “You are not heard, seen or validated. Your feelings are usually ignored or dismissed” (p. 38). In most cases, the most difficult aspect is not feeling loved, making it difficult to accept and stay married. Love for a narcissist is like having a new bike, they like how they look on it, but they do not know how to ride it (McBride, 2015).

Grey (2013) explains that narcissists do leave their long-term relationships. “When they do, it is because they have a new source of supply, and they have begun the process of devaluing the former source. When this happens the Narcissist’s emotions will change almost seemingly overnight, and this abrupt change is cold, cruel and almost surreal” (para 9).

In narcissistic relationships, the divorce rate might be higher, in particular when there are no children involved. Narcissistically vulnerable marriages are entities qualitatively different from all other marriages (Feldman, 1982). These types of marriages differ in their severity of dysfunction, primarily according to where on the narcissism spectrum the narcissistic personality falls (Kernberg, 1974). McBride (2015) says:

We can all be stuck in denial. When we marry or enter a relationship that we want to work but find it’s dysfunctional, we ask ourselves what we can do to make it better, instead of confronting the reality that we can’t fix it on our own. When we start to realize that nothing we do seems to help, many people decide they need to get therapy to understand themselves and their relationship better (p.35).

Healthy relationships require the existence of communication, reciprocity, and sharing all decisions. The study by Campbell and Lackenbauer (2012) aimed to identify
how partners view each other’s discrepancies before and after the marriage. This study also emphasized how viewing the discrepancies affects their marriage and the way they treat their partners. Marital satisfaction may be measured by emotional responses to everyday interactions. Another way of measuring interaction was through a “global partner evaluation,” where partners could evaluate their spouses by attributing adjectives to them (Campbell & Lackenbauer, 2012, p. 478). Based on daily interactions of married couples, the study utilized patterns to evaluate the discrepancies between the spouses, and those observations predicted the outcome of their future interactions, and perhaps predicted divorce.

So once it is established that the relationship is no longer viable in its current state, couples may attempt to seek family therapy or part ways. Therapy, for narcissists, is rarely an option, as individuals with these traits deny they have issues and deny they need help. Healing narcissistic wounds is not easy, as these couples tend to have issues for a prolonged time, leading to divorce and long-standing custody battles. These battles are often accompanied by years of irreparable pain and suffering for the parents and children.

Such relationships tend to struggle indefinitely, causing entire families to continue to strive to find an end to their distress. Solomon (1992) explores treatment options for couple’s therapy when one of the partners is a narcissist. Unfortunately, therapy often starts when significant damage has already been inflicted. At one point, the partner may try to end the marriage or may simply offer an ultimatum. The narcissist may accept the need for help and search for solutions. The couple may come to the realization that divorce may not be an option, and they may try to find an alternative to save the marriage. Only then do they seek help and try to work as a team.
both partners depend upon the therapist to rescue them. In collaboration, they can acquire new skills to deal with the imbalances in their relationship.

Relationships are in themselves complex entities that need nurturing to blossom. In reality there is no perfect recipe for helping couples establish a healthy bond. In a narcissistic environment, the lack of empathy is a major burden that needs to be addressed. A partner’s desire to be validated after years of being in the shadow of the narcissist is often a primary reason for seeking therapy.

Section 2: The Narcissist in a Narcissistic Marital System

Narcissism is defined as a “pervasive behavioral pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy beginning in early adulthood” (DSM V, 2013, p. 669). While researchers may differ on what traits are expressed, they generally agree that narcissism involves abnormal levels of self-esteem, grandiosity, self-centeredness, and self-importance in order to meet ego needs due to gross lack of healthy self-esteem (Maltas, 1991, MacDonald, 2014, Campbell, 1999). Narcissists tend to either come from families where they were indulged and spoiled but their emotional needs were ignored, or from households which exhibited some form of abuse or neglect (Maltas, 1991).

One theory describes that, as young children, narcissists were unable to have their love for a caregiver reciprocated; therefore, they lack empathy and learn to disregard the affection of others as a defense mechanism. In adulthood, the narcissist’s dysfunctional interactions are portrayed with the repeated inability to be sensitive to the feelings of the intimate partner. In most cases narcissistic vulnerabilities are carried on into adulthood and into intimate marital relationships (Maltas, 1991).

According to Wright, O’Leary, and Balkin (1989), even though narcissism has no
gender specification, clinical evidence shows that males are more likely to use narcissistic defenses that are damaging to relational integrity. Behary (2013) explains that there is a reason the majority of narcissists are male, “This is partly attributed to gender-related qualities, such as aggression, competitiveness, limited attachment to others, dominance, and societal norms” (p.10). Although women can be narcissistic too, their traits are mostly shown in appearance, accomplishments of their children, their estates, and trying to be recognized as outstanding mothers (Behary, 2013). They may also be recognized as divas. One similarity is that both male and female narcissists have the recurring need to be the center of attention. More often, women fall prey to narcissistic men’s charms, intelligence, accomplishments, and impeccable self-confidence. The narcissistic partner seems to be perfect in all aspects at first. As Behary (2013) points out, however, “the narcissist both appeals and appalls” (p.13).

Since they cannot find fault with themselves, narcissists aren’t apt to want to go to therapy to seek change. They do not see themselves as being the problem. Behary (2013) points out that “In therapy, empathic awareness is the launching pad for setting limits and holding clients accountable for unkind acts and lack of remorse” (p.139). Because this personality disorder predisposes a person to externalize faults and blame his partner, the narcissist views therapy as a means to make his partner take responsibility for all the problems in the relationship. A woman with a narcissist may not be aware that she is simply a source for his addiction to a “narcissistic supply.” Canonville (2016) clarified:

Narcissistic Supply really refers to those people who provide a constant source of attention, approval, adoration, admiration, etc., for the narcissist. The attention they receive from the “Supply Source” is vital for the survival of the narcissist, without
it they would die (either physically or metaphorically), because their weak ego depends on it in order to regulate their unstable self-worth and self-esteem” (para. 2).

This supply may come in many forms; it may be difficult to detect which behavior fits the category. An example of source of supply may be simply making way for the narcissist to have the least interruption of his pleasant daily activity (trying to avoid disrupting his nap, making sure his needs are met with accuracy and persistence). Canonville (2016) explains how this narcissistic supply is anything that feeds their addiction for admiration and respect from others. The literature portrays the supplier as also the caregiver who finds some form of gratification in the caregiving process. The bond created by the care given provides the supplier with satisfaction because the individual feels needed, and therefore, temporarily important. As will be discussed in more depth later, being the source of a narcissist’s supply is a two-edged sword, flattering at first but devastating later when, like a parasite, the narcissist gradually consumes his victim’s self-esteem for his own aggrandizement. For the women involved, it’s a fairy-tale turned nightmare; the dream becomes an emotional prison with this man.

**Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)**

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) has been defined as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy (DSM-V, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Narcissists may also demonstrate excessive self-love, inflated self-views, a self-serving bias, and demanding displays of entitlement (Campbell, Brunnell, & Finkel, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is 1 of the 10 clinically recognized
personality disorders listed in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*. It belongs to the subset of cluster B personality disorders, which are those marked by an intense degree of drama and emotionality. Historically, there has been much debate surrounding the exact definition of NPD, and competing theories exist regarding its etiology and optimal treatment (Ambardar, 2016, para 1).

According to Behary (2013), the criteria for overt maladaptive narcissism, which is the most common and difficult form of narcissism, is to present at least ten of the following traits:

- Self-absorbed (acts like everything is all about them)
- Entitled (makes the rules and breaks the rules)
- Demeaning (puts you down and is bullish)
- Demanding (demands whatever he wants)
- Distrustful (is suspicious of your motives)
- Perfectionist (has rigid high standards)
- Snobbish (believes he is superior)
- Approval seeking (needs praise and recognition)
- Unempathic (unable or unwilling to understand your inner experience)
- Unremorseful (cannot apologize)
- Compulsive (overly consumed with details)
- Addictive (uses bad habits to self-soothe)
- Emotionally detached (avoids experiencing feelings). (p.15)

If an individual has fewer of the above traits, they may have difficulties in relating to
others, but to a lesser degree. Because narcissism is identified as a spectrum disorder, there may be many recognizable levels.

On the other hand, in a clinical perspective, Ambardar (2016) points out that diagnostic criteria seem to be changing from a strict criterion-based model, where at least 5 out of 9 listed criteria or traits need be present, towards a more “dimensional” model “as outlined in section III of DSM-5 (‘Emerging Measures and Models’) (para. 3)”.

Ambardar (2016) said in this proposed new model:

NPD is manifested by characteristic difficulties in two or more of the following four areas:  
- Identity - Excessive reference to others for self-definition and self-esteem regulation; exaggerated self-appraisal inflated or deflated, or vacillating between extremes; emotional regulation mirroring fluctuations in self-esteem.  
- Self-direction - Goal setting based on gaining approval from others; personal standards that are either unreasonably high (in order to see oneself as exceptional) or too low (from a sense of entitlement); frequent unawareness of one’s own motivations.  
- Empathy - Impaired ability to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; excessive attunement to reactions of others, but only if these are perceived as relevant to the self; over- or underestimation of one’s own effect on others.  
- Intimacy - Relationships that are largely superficial and exist to serve self-esteem regulation; mutuality constrained by little genuine interest in others’ experiences and predominance of a need for personal gain.  

NPD is characterized by the presence of both of the following pathologic personality traits:

- Grandiosity (an aspect of antagonism) - Feelings of entitlement, either overt or covert; self-centeredness; firm attachment to the belief that one is better than
others; condescension toward others.

- Attention seeking (an aspect of antagonism) - Excessive attempts to attract and be the focus of the attention of others; admiration seeking. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013. 761-81.)

Kernberg (1974, p.15) put forth an object-relations model whereby the child creates and adopts a grandiose self to protect himself from the pain of an unloving mother who devalues or rejects him. In this theory, the child splits his personality, relegating the needy, unlovable wounded image of himself to his unconscious. “This unconscious-self forms the basis for the fragile self-esteem and sense of inferiority present in NPD” (Akhtar, 2009, p. 139). The other model put forth by Kohut (1971) blames parents who do not offer “effective mirroring,” that is adequate praise so the child can “idealize” or internalize positive parental images. With no positive self-image to internalize, this causes “developmental arrest in normal psychological growth.” Kernberg and Kohut disagree on how to understand and treat either the grandiose or depleted aspects of the narcissist.

Young children naturally assume that they are the center of the universe (It is common knowledge that infants don’t understand that they are separate from the world around them). As children grow, healthy mirroring helps them safely let go of this childish, unrealistic, and grandiose self. Children who are raised as extensions of their self-absorbed parents become narcissistic (Snyder & Whisman, 2003). On the other hand, children who feel valued for their individuality and are allowed to be autonomous and self-determining have healthier egos and healthy self-esteem.

The bottom line with both models is that NPD is created in early childhood.
development, making the child unnaturally insecure about his or her worthiness. Snyder & Whisman (2003) agree. “The self creates a defensive, grandiose state of self-sufficiency and seeks admiration from others to confirm its worth” (p.286). It is a primal insecurity that the narcissist unconsciously and desperately must mask to feel safe in the world. Like Narcissus in the Greek myth, his esteem is subject to disappear at any moment, and he will feel panic and stress when his grandiosity is threatened and resort to a whole range of notable narcissistic behaviors.

There are various narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) assessments, and though these alone would not be enough to diagnose a person with NPD, they measure strengths of certain traits that are high in persons with NPD. One test measures levels of authority, self-sufficiency, superiority, exhibitionism, exploitativeness, vanity, and sense of entitlement. Some of these traits are not necessarily bad per se; it really is about how they combine to impact the person’s functioning and his relationships. Exline et. al (2004) said:

Entitlement is more explicitly interpersonal, emphasizing one’s assumptions about how others should treat the self. The entitled component of narcissism implies that a person expects special, preferential treatment from others. Because such special treatment is not always forthcoming, entitled narcissists should be easy to offend. (p.895)

There are two components of narcissism previously studied: vulnerable and grandiose. Individuals with vulnerable narcissism have a negative and fragile view of themselves. Vulnerable narcissists are also known as closet, hypersensitive, or covert narcissists. “Vulnerable narcissists are less equipped to use self-enhancement strategies to
modulate self-esteem, and often must rely upon external feedback from others to manage self-esteem” (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003, p. 189).

Grandiose narcissism is portrayed by the individual with inflated ego, who is overly concerned with self-image and has little interest in the feelings of others. “The grandiose narcissistic individual is more likely to regulate self-esteem through overt self-enhancement, denial of weaknesses, intimidating demands of entitlement, consistent anger in unmet expectations, and devaluation of people that threaten self-esteem” (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003, p. 189). “Vulnerable and grandiose narcissism share common facets, including the need for admiration, dependence on others to establish and maintain self-esteem, and struggles with emotional dysregulation” (Lamkin, Clifton, Campbell & Miller, 2014, cited in Luchner & Tantleff-Dunn, 2016, p. 597).

The differential effects of social pressure on people with vulnerable versus grandiose narcissism may reflect different deficits in cognitive and affective empathic attunement. Empathy is of little interest to those who are grandiose, while those who are vulnerable feel they must be empathic in order to be admired, accepted, and valued (Luchner & Tantleff-Dunn, 2016, p. 599).

There is controversy about the diagnosis of both types of narcissism. The grandiose type is known to be oblivious to any defect; it is often easier to recognize a grandiose narcissist from any angle. The vulnerable type, on the other hand, is less likely to be recognized as a narcissist, but is the one to most likely show up in therapy due to depression, anxiety and emotional dysregulation. “Vulnerable narcissism could be misdiagnosed with at least two other distinct DSM personality disorders: Avoidant Personality Disorder (AVPD) and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)” (Dickinson &
It is clear that the NPD spectrum has many shades from slight to pathological, and that other psychological factors come into play. Patients with NPD, as with other personality disorders, “are more likely to have a comorbid Axis I diagnosis, such as major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, substance-related disorders (specifically related to cocaine and alcohol), anxiety disorders, and anorexia nervosa” (Waller, Sines & Meyer, 2007, p.143). Nevertheless, married adults with personality disorders have more relationship issues then their non-pathological counterparts (Snyder & Whisman, 2003).

Section 3: The Partner of a Narcissist in a Narcissistic Marital System

The women who love them

Henry David Thoreau said, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” We can elaborate on the spectrums of NPD and other theories of how a narcissist got that way, but the question here is how do men with NPD impact the women who love them? All personality disorders cause distress to relationships and pose a great challenge to maintaining a long term relationship. Solomon (1992) says that a marriage can “foster growth and a new level of individual functioning, or it can become a new way of dealing with old conflicts and unmet needs” (p.24). Often one partner may need admiration and the other needs understanding, but the communication between them is not clear due to fear of exposing vulnerabilities. “Partners who are free to accept and understand each other’s needs are also free to support each other’s search for individual satisfaction” (Solomon, 1992, p.25). Schalkwyk (2005) reported:

As women, we feel a need to do everything in our power to 'make it work' —
take care of and support a spouse. Fit in with convention, compromise, take second place, even survive abuse, and accept full responsibility for the failure of the relationship.” (p.93)

Women I have encountered claim they had partners that exhibited narcissistic traits, though often they cannot claim that their partners had an official diagnosis of NPD. Besides, it is highly doubtful their partners would ever subject themselves to such scrutiny. Whether NPD is treatable is subject to a lot of controversy. All agree there is no cure, but some suggest it can be managed. Solomon (1992) suggests that “sometimes narcissistic pathology is mitigated by mutual support” (p.57). When in treatment, partners may feel safe enough to avoid being defensive, or attacking, instead exploring themselves and working toward growth in the relationship. Solomon (1992) believes that no matter how severe the disorder, there is always a basic human need for being loved and accepted in the relationship.

To some extent, it is reasonable to say that a compromise is subject to the degree of the dysfunction, as all cases are not equal. These women certainly describe behaviors common to those with NPD. They learn to maintain self-sacrificing behaviors in order to cope with the narcissistic abuse, avoid confrontation and keep the peace. They have predominant feelings of being subjugated, abandoned, emotionally deprived, undesired, and often try to be perfect for their partners. They often believe it is their fault the relationship is in distress (Behary, 2003).

Grey (2013) explains that:

Women with unhealthy relationship habits tend to put up with a lot of abuse and it is abuse. They usually have low self-esteem, they’re too nice, too giving, people pleasers,
women who engage in fantasy relationships, are co-dependent, doormats, or they like a fixer upper (para. 3).

Behavior that is at first confusing, and later frightening, eventually leads the partners of narcissists to seek help, in some instances with the partner that was frightening them. One common point, which seems to be confirmed by much of the literature on narcissists in relationships is the lost “fairytale experience”—how this man went from being a Prince Charming to Mr. Alarming. There is clearly a pattern of progression in a relationship with a narcissist, a long and winding road of hoping she finds that prince he once was. That dream guy never really existed. So this is the road to what some are now recognizing as Narcissistic Abuse Syndrome or Narcissistic Victim Syndrome, in addition to what it means to be the source of narcissistic supply.

Boldt (2007) explains that in the psychodynamics of intimate relationship, there is an “ongoing struggle with power and the pursuit of individual superiority (p.146).” In the case of those with NPD, their grandiosity and entitlement demand that they always be superior to their partners. Isolating this aspect, she explores what type of person partners with someone who must always be superior. She explores “central themes and lifestyle belief systems of those whose personalities feed the needs of the person-who-must be-superior.” (p.146) It seems that opposites attract in this case, the narcissist being exploitative will gravitate to those who are submissive and can therefore be exploited. Boldt (2007) suggests it is those who feel unimportant, inferior, and unentitled, who get enmeshed with the narcissist. She describes three personality types that are submissive: The Pleaser, The Victim, and The Martyr.
ROLE OF NARCISSISM IN RELATIONSHIPS

Each type has unique challenges and can present a spectrum ranging from effective to ineffective. The continuum for the pleaser goes from the caregiver (effective) to the doormat (ineffective). The continuum for the victim goes from survivor (effective) to casualty (ineffective). And the continuum for the martyr goes from saint (effective) to self-defeater (ineffective). Boldt (2007) acknowledges that for her case studies, she focused on the more problematic and extreme end of the continuum of each type. She offers general advice for treatment for “restoring self-esteem, creativity, and capability” (p. 154). Then she offers unique tactics for helping the doormat pleaser, the casualty victim and the self-defeating martyr. In treatment, safety is of prime concern as she points out that Craig (2003) identified the male individual with NPD as one type of perpetrator of domestic violence” (p. 153). She warns that the narcissist will use couple’s therapy to further prop himself up at his partner’s expense, and that at times he may try to deceive the therapist, mistakenly portraying his partner’s symptoms of stress caused by the relationship as the problem.

Each of these types share that their engagement with the NPD partner allows the narcissist to maintain his person-who-must-be-superior status, while the narcissist’s partner is disempowered and abused. This is a cycle of abuse that will continue until the submissive partner comes to understand what is going on. One difficulty is that these submissive personalities are operating without consciously being aware of the damaged internal scripts or schemas that are motivating them to stay in a submissive role to one who is exploiting them.
Interestingly, different from the Pleaser and the Victim, The Martyr does not seem intimidated by the narcissist or held by fear as the other two types do, which may actually put her in a more vulnerable position regarding an NPD partner’s rage.

It is possible that an effective treatment may only occur if a spouse is safely in therapy, separate from the narcissist. Since treatment involves being more self-assertive and seeking a more balanced give and take in a relationship, as well as recognizing abuse for what it is, one can see how seeking such improvements together with an abusive NPD partner would not allow for assertiveness on the part of the non-narcissistic partner, may not be successful, and may trigger rage in the narcissistic partner.

On the other hand, while some authors suggest narcissistic men target or are drawn to submissive women with low self-esteem, Schneider (2013) suggests that they may actually be drawn to or target “intelligent, self-sufficient, empathic individuals as partners” (para.7). The narcissist actually lacks self-esteem in his psyche, and is drawn to people who have within themselves that which he lacks. This is a controversial statement, which suggests that there may be different traits in a woman that attract different narcissists, and a broader variety of women that may be attracted to them.

**Narcissistic Victim Syndrome (NVS)**

The collection of symptoms that make up this syndrome gradually develops over the course of the relationship. Being the source of “narcissistic supply” is draining, disorienting, emotionally exhausting, and leads to depression and loss of a sense of self. They are symptoms of trauma “avoidance behavior, loss of interest, feeling detached, sense of limited future, sleeping or eating difficulties, irritability, hyper-vigilance, easily startled, flashbacks, hopelessness, psychosomatic illness, self-harming, thoughts of
suicide etc” (Canonville, 2016, para. 21). Canonville (2016) brings up the psychological condition of Stockholm Syndrome, which “involves the victim emotionally bonding with their narcissistic captors, this “trauma bonding” is a strategy of survival for victims of narcissistic abuse and intimidation” (para. 21).

Canonville (2016) explains, “the victim needs to understand that this dance of codependency requires two people: the pleaser/fixer (victim), and the taker/controller (narcissist/ addict) (para. 12). Further she likens “narcissism to a parasitic worm that manages to penetrate under the skin, where it is out of the sight of witnessing eyes, but is free to injure or consume its host slowly, leaving trauma or disease in its wake” (para. 14). This seems to highlight the cunning and insidiousness of the narcissist’s tactics to the point where the victim may be unaware she is actually a victim until great damage has been done. The narcissist seems to value his partner in the beginning, but he is just baiting her to maintain his source of what he is addicted to: narcissistic supply.

As explained earlier, Canonville (2016) details how this narcissistic supply is anything that feeds his addiction for admiration and respect from others. The sad story with narcissists is that all the admiration and love they crave is killed off and pushed away because their inferiority complex is so great that they must diminish anyone who becomes an insider, a long term partner. The narcissist can fool the outside world with flattery, being charming and putting on his usual con. But his mate can only become his victim. Grey (2013) states that “the Narcissist’s partner must be subservient, all sacrificing and self-deprecating— the consummate victim. If she wasn’t co-dependent before the relationship, she soon will be” (para. 7). He will inflate himself by deflating her. It really is a “parasitic” relationship. He will aggrandize himself at his partner’s
expense. Deep down inside he fears he is nothing, so he resorts to this perverse caricature of self-esteem. So why did he seem like such great mate material at first? This Dr. Jekyll versus Mr. Hyde phenomenon can be explained by the two sides of the narcissistic coin called “admiration” and “rivalry.”

Victim’s perspective

Brown (2016), to help women safeguard themselves from predators, criticizes the establishment of psychology for the extensive time and resources that has been put into examining psychopaths, while failing to put in equal time and resource into understanding the victims. NVS partners of narcissists with full blown NPD diagnosis have also been labeled as psychopaths, and they are both in the category of personality disorders. Brown came into the field of pathology to counsel the victims of crimes and had not made an intentional choice to work with Cluster B relationships. She places narcissists in this group along with antisocial, histrionic, and borderline. Brown (2016) met in counseling the victims of these disordered men:

…learning things from them that made my hair stand on end, I wondered why others had not bothered to study the persons who were exposed to the most dangerous relationships on the planet! If the field of violence prevention had been around since the 1970s, why wasn’t this pool of potential homicide-risk victims better identified for prevention or treatment at the very least? Why had no one ever thought to collect the precious data they – and they alone – could provide? (para. 7)

Brown (2016) later founded The Institute to Conduct Victim-based Research and has recently completed a study with more than 600 respondents that shows the same
results. She found that all the labels often attributed to women who get enmeshed with psychopaths simply do not apply: labels such as co-dependent, relationship/sex addict, having dependent personality disorder, probably the victim of abuse from a father, etc.

Brown’s (2016) main goal is to help women identify the disordered male. The reason women become victims is they do not recognize “the difference between normal personality diversity and the signs and symptoms of pathology” (para. 6). The women in her research included victims of narcissistic abuse. Brown (2016) demonstrated:

I noticed the ‘dangerous man’ experiences from which women were healing were largely due to two types of pathology: narcissists and the whole antisocial end of the pathology spectrum, which includes antisocial personality disorders, sociopaths and psychopaths. And so, I initiated psychopathology education for the community-at-large (para. 6).

Brown’s research of the victims shows how they have been stereotyped with victims of domestic violence, stereotypes without basis in truth and which are often counterproductive. She believes her victim-based research helps in understanding “the long-missing issue of their unusual relationship dynamics and their often masked aftermath of symptomatology” (para. 9). Brown found that “The Jekyll and Hyde dichotomous personality of the psychopath coupled with ‘crazy-making’ relationship dynamics aided the development of cognitive dissonance in the victims, weakening an otherwise strong emotional constitution” (para. 10). Most of these women reported being well-adjusted, educated, and yet, they fell for the narcissist’s flirtation. The intensity of the relationship and the traumatic bond made it even harder for them to recognize any dysfunction, which sounds like NVS. They experienced unusual symptoms, often
described as PTSD, after the break-up. Brown’s research helps the understanding of the permanent hard-wired nature of these disorders. “While we hope this eventually adjusts the erroneous belief that psychopathology is not merely willful behavior, it is evident that the lack of education for victims; victims continue to assume batterer intervention or therapy will change the psychopath” (para. 10).

Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience explain brain differences in psychopaths (and other Cluster Bs). Hoermann, Zupanick & Dombeck (2016) described Cluster B as the “dramatic, emotional, and erratic cluster. It includes: Borderline Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Histrionic Personality Disorder, Antisocial Personality Disorder. Disorders in this cluster share problems with impulse control and emotional regulation” (para 1).

It is important to mention that Brown (2016) believed that intervention cannot change a person who falls in this Cluster B category and to highlight the importance in couple’s therapy of safety as a priority goal for helping any relationship. While the narcissist may not be willfully abusive, he is nonetheless abusive, and a therapist must inform any victim when abuse in any fashion by a partner is observed.

Brown’s research revealed much in common among the victims that has nothing to do with the victim stereotypes previously mentioned. She reports that the combination of traits that makes these women victims of dangerous men are: too much empathy, high bonding, high sentimentality and low harm avoidance (because they trust openly). Essentially, she said these women have big hearts, love deeply, depend on their relationships, and are too trustworthy, thinking people are as decent and loving as they are (para. 14). They generally are extroverts, adventurous, and invested in the
relationship. They also tend to stand their ground, have a positive attitude towards hardship (some were never exposed to abuse before), and take responsibility.

Brown acknowledged her approach differs from other psychopathy researchers, because her information and insight into the psychopath comes from the victim rather than the self-reporting of the psychopath. But through the victims’ detailed reporting, she believes we can come to know “what pathology in the psychopath looks like, acts like, and hides like” (para. 23). She made a good point that the fact that psychopaths are cunning and liars makes standardized research approaches based on self-reporting by the psychopath problematic. And the research is done on caught psychopaths, not successful ones, the ones that continue to hide and keep doing their damage.

This is not the first study declaring that narcissists overlap traits of psychopaths, and that there may not be hope for helping couples when one of the partners presents as a narcissist. However, the main question is how would a therapist know the degree and extent of the narcissism? Other authors express that the narcissist is cunning and that the victim may present as the dysfunctional partner because of her symptoms from the abuse. So clearly more knowledge about the symptoms of Narcissistic Victim Abuse would help any therapist in identifying what may be going on in the couple’s dynamic. Overall, there is not enough research done from the victim’s point of view.

**Mirror, mirror: sense of self**

In being less than perfect, we strive to live our lives facing the fortunes and misfortunes of our days, hopefully keeping our sense of self intact in the process. Some of us will play along and acquire wisdom from our mistakes; others will not learn from
them, and in fact, will not admit making mistakes so as not to appear weak. They will blame others, and lower the other’s sense of self, maybe even crushing it in the long term.

Blackburn (2014) suggests that “Our sense of self is reciprocal with our sense of other people, and their sense of us” (p. 28). In other words, the world around us is where we find ourselves and our place and where we discover our own identity. As individuals we are objects in our experiences, subject to the evaluation of others. Blackburn goes on to mention “With interpersonal consciousness comes the awareness of evaluative perspectives within which one is not automatically on a pedestal, but on the contrary always in danger of being an object of judgment or even of derision or contempt” (p. 29).

Our identity is also built by the way we perceive ourselves in our social interactions, in our work, family, and school environments. Others have an enormous influence on how we feel about ourselves. Hence, bullies are a destructive force on people’s self-esteem, no matter what age. Blackburn (2014) describes “The most important thing in one’s experiences are the relations it has to the social environment: the circle of those others whose takes on me so infuse my take on myself” (p. 33).

**Self-esteem’s role, not so obvious**

Let us look more at how and why the narcissist's trials of control dig in so deeply. The partner of a narcissist does not necessarily have low-self-esteem. Of course it may be that the partner never had low self-esteem, or that the relationship itself might erode the once existing self-esteem of the partner.

Narcissism is often confused with high self-esteem. Narcissists are known to have high self-esteem, and in fact many techniques used to increase self-esteem might lead to greater narcissism. But narcissism and self-esteem differ in an important
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way. Narcissists think they are smarter, better looking, and more important than others, but not necessarily more moral, more caring, or more compassionate.

People merely high in self-esteem also have positive views of themselves, but they also see themselves as loving and moral (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 24).

Ye, Lam, Ma & Ng (2016) identified “differential relations of narcissism and self-esteem to romantic relationship: the mediating role of perception discrepancy,” and examined couples to identify how self-esteem versus narcissism affected romantic relationships differently (p. 374). Their research highlights the fact that narcissists demonstrate a greater dose of self-esteem, but it is self-esteem’s dark imposter. The fragile self-esteem of the narcissist drives him to extreme measures to create a façade of self-esteem. In others words, in order to maintain his self-esteem, the narcissist depends on his partner’s total conformity to his will. And since people are free agents, he needs to control and manipulate his partner into compliance. It is an unnatural way of relating. Many women who finally divorce a narcissist often describe a sense of being a hostage more than a partner (Ye et al., 2016).

People with a high level of narcissism often crave respect and admiration from others, see themselves as superior to others, and have an egoistic and antagonistic orientation towards others. In contrast, people with high self-esteem do not base their positive self-views on relative evaluations about themselves and others. They tend to develop positive self-views through their own personal qualities and achievements, without seeing others as inferior (Brummelman. Thomaes, Sedikides, 2016; Orth et al., 2016).

Healthy self-esteem allows for the free exchange of thoughts and emotions without
the ego threats that a narcissist would experience. Without the oppressive need to have the partner’s validation, the non-narcissistic partner is free to be herself. Although many assume that a woman who stays with a narcissist has low self-esteem, this study suggests that it may be an intact self-esteem that allows these women to persevere, to forgive, to self-reflect, to be able to elevate another person without feeling threatened. One could even speculate that a person with weak self-esteem wouldn’t last a day with a narcissist. (Ye et al., 2016) also assert that self-esteem correlates with a sense of morality and those with intact self-esteem are more prone to shame and guilt.

The partners tend to be less tolerant of and more easily upset by the unfavorable acts of their narcissistic partners. Therefore, narcissists may underestimate their partners’ unhappiness caused by their unfavorable acts. Individuals with higher self-esteem may be more tolerant of and less upset by the unfavorable acts of their partners. “High self-esteem individuals may be sensitive to their partners’ unhappiness resulting from their unfavorable acts “(Ye et al., 2016, p. 376).

Ye et al. (2016) mentions that narcissists have a low level of forgiveness, less tolerance for a partner’s perceived transgressions, less empathy, and feel less guilt and shame in general. Meanwhile those with genuine self-esteem are generally more forgiving and tolerant of unfavorable aspects and interestingly more prone to feelings of guilt and shame. So if healthy self-esteem comes with a sense of morality, the narcissist will exploit this moral aspect of his partner. So if we return to the case of the women who reported when her narcissistic partner suddenly became so distraught at the thought of losing her that she felt guilty, he was using her own sense of compassion to manipulate her. His fear of losing her as a source of narcissistic supply led him to bait her, getting her
to change her mind about leaving, at least temporarily. After a while that strategy became obvious for what it was: crocodile tears. A person with intact self-esteem cannot measure what they are really dealing with, and by the time they figure it out, they are experiencing the symptoms associated with NVS.

“With respect to romantic relationships, it has been revealed that narcissists view themselves as better than their partners and do not view their partners as better-than-average others” (Ye et al. 2016, p. 376). On the other hand, high self-esteem individuals do not view themselves as better than their partners (Campbell & Foster, 2002).

One can surmise that the injured ego of the narcissist asks the impossible of his partner and he will drain his partner dry. At first the partner of the narcissist will step on the narcissists emotional land mines, not knowing or understanding what she did. And assuming she has a normal self-esteem with a “moralistic bias”, she will try and try at first, thinking she is at fault (Paulhus, 1998). She may take responsibility and try to do better. Part of self-esteem is the ability to self-reflect and accept fault without one’s world collapsing. The narcissist cannot do this. According to Ye et al. (2016), It seems the partner of the narcissist does not necessarily have low self-esteem. What may be happening are boundary issues. It could be that not recognizing an invasion of one’s boundaries might be a trait of nice people. They just are not accustomed to running into such personalities. Unsuspecting and naive, they just do not understand there are broken people in the world that will exploit them, until it happens to them.

**The empath’s vulnerability**

According to Luchner & Tantleff-Dunn (2016) “Empathy, like narcissism, is not a unitary construct. Empathy can be used to describe our ability to understand others
psychologically and also to describe how emotionally attuned we are with others” (Tolmacz, 2008, cited in p. 599). Empathy may also be used in maladaptive ways, such as, when individuals allow their empathy to dictate how much they are needed. They may ignore their own needs in favor of what others may need or want, in order to feel good about themselves. Their sense of self depends on how others perceive them; they may even be dependent on that kind of attention as a form of maladaptive empathy (Luchner & Tantleff-Dunn, 2016). Regardless of how it is used, empathy is a virtue that is necessary to form a bond in any relationship.

Knowing where one’s self begins and ends may be a challenge when in an intense romantic relationship. The narcissist has the hidden expectation that his partner is an extension of himself. The narcissist naturally feels broadly entitled. He will take advantage of empathic, and nicer people. This raises the question: Are nicer people weak willed and more subject to the pressure other people put on them to conform? Or are they simply empaths that were fooled?

Schneider (2013) mentions how she prides herself on being a “strengths-focused” (Chan, Chan & Ng, 2006) therapist wanting to veer away from “disempowering diagnostic nomenclature” (para. 1). Over time, even she realized that there really are lots of narcissists out there. When she encountered clients in the wake of narcissistic abuse, she saw that these women had more healing to do than clients who broke up from normal relationship challenges. These women actually exhibited signs of post-traumatic stress, and her belief is that “psychotherapy must focus on grief work and trauma recovery…” because they have to process that they were in a “fake relationship” (para. 9).
Schneider (2013) focuses on helping women identify any narcissist early on in the
dating game before they are hooked. There are key traits to look out for. She presents
statistics from Brown (2013) that, although 1% of the general population has Narcissistic
Personality Disorder, 75% of those with NPD are male. This does not imply that women
cannot be narcissists. Considering how unappealing the definition of narcissism is, she
begs the question how would anyone find such a person attractive? And it is a really a
good question, in fact. In answering this question, we can, perhaps, help women avoid or
become free of such demoralizing men. When dating, the narcissist markets himself
very deceptively, presenting a false fantasy image of himself to the women he is luring.
He lures her, baiting her, rather than getting to really know her and care about her.

One of the tell-tale signs seems to be the speed and intensity of the narcissist’s
approach. Some men have actually taken courses in speed seduction as a way to
manipulate women, since they don’t know how else to relate to women in a healthy way.
Schneider described the honeymoon period with the narcissist in dating as a con job; she
said:

They may present with a swagger, intense eye contact, false bravado/charm,
knock-your-socks-off seduction (often learned by neurolinguistic programming
(NLP) programs or online seduction programs), swift pacing of rushing the
relationship into commitment/cohabitation/marriage/business partnership,
promising a future together (which is later discovered to be a lie), intense sexual
chemistry, love-bombing (repetitive texting, emailing, phone calls), or romancing
the target excessively (flowers, etc). (para. 6)
Once a woman is emotionally hooked and given to trusting him, his true colors start to emerge, and the honeymoon period is over. What happens next is the nightmare. The woman finds herself constantly demoralized by her partner who is now suddenly abusive verbally, mentally, emotionally, and even physically at times. And she may stay hoping prince charming will come back, if she can just figure out what’s wrong. But what’s wrong is that this prince was never real to begin with, because he literally brainwashed her. Lacking a core identity, he is filling his empty psyche at her expense: a term known as “narcissistic supply” (Kernberg, 1975).

It seems that the narcissist who has no empathy definitely sees the empathy of his partner as a weakness to be exploited. Let us emphasize this because it seems that the more empathetic a person is, and the more naïve (believing in the goodness of others), the more vulnerable that woman may be to becoming enmeshed with such a mate. The term empath is used frequently to describe people who are very sensitive to the energies of other people. The empath’s sensitivity denotes softer more flexible personal boundaries. There might be something to this. It might be worth isolating traits like empathy and self-esteem in assessing victims of narcissistic abuse and seeing if there are any correlations.

The caregiver

A woman may be strong and confident when approached and courted by the narcissist, but the attention he offers her does not last long. She may enjoy being the center of attention of the narcissist, but after the successful catch, the narcissist needs to focus on himself again, and will expect the woman to passively follow him. The non-narcissistic spouse often has to deny part of who she is in order to conform to the rules of engagement. She may struggle to live a peaceful life, while constantly having to let go of
herself. Her role becomes that of the caregiver, the one who provides the narcissist with the narcissistic supply. To maintain the caregiver goal, her thoughts and feelings shift in order to live a life that is not her own (Fjelstad, 2013). According to Fjelstad (2013), the individual that follows that pattern eventually ceases to exist. She may ultimately forget she has her own opinions and tastes; she is good at giving endlessly. Reciprocation from the narcissist is not an option. Fjelstad (2013) believed that one can never expect reciprocity; giving up more of oneself is self-defeating because the caregiver is often hurt and gets angry for not getting much back from the narcissist.

Love is supposed to be a two-way highway, but in such relationships, love is given at disproportional levels. The partner must give up waiting for reciprocal responses from the narcissist. The behaviors of a narcissist are not logical, as much as they try to reinforce that the other partner is the one that is illogical. Fjelstad (2013) stressed that a caregiver often believes that she is as bad as the narcissist. Marriages are supposed to have equal responsibilities in the relationship, but in such cases, a caregiver looks for logic that is not there. Caregivers tend to constantly try to please their partners. Plans are often changed depending on the mood of the narcissist. Chaos is a constant, in particular, emotional chaos (Fjelstad, 2013). After a while, chaos seems normal. Anticipating disaster is a constant part of life for the partner of a narcissist, and she feels compelled to put on a good face and act as if nothing is wrong.

It is difficult to be yourself in the demanding relationship discussed; to be yourself and be supported is nearly impossible. The equality sought in a relationship becomes jeopardized by the demand for caring from the narcissist. Caregiving nurtures the caregiver, and there is a bond created in the process. Are women who fall for the
caregiver position all caregivers by nature? Or do they enjoy the position because they get some reward from it? The reward may come in the form of exciting sex, expensive gifts, and temporary expressions of love and affection.

**Identity loss in NVS- an echo of her former self**

Like the mythical Echo, who loved Narcissus, the partner of a narcissist is left to perish. There is no equal exchange of love. After Narcissus yells at her, “I should rather die than you should have me,” Echo retreats to the recesses of the woods. From that time forth she lives in caves...her form faded with grief, till at last all her flesh shrinks away. Her bones are changed into rocks and there is nothing left of her but her voice. With that she is still ready to reply to anyone who calls her, and keep up the old habit of having the last word.

The victim of NVS suffers similarly to Echo. The pain of a relationship without reciprocity eventually takes its toll. When it comes to reciprocity in healthy relationships, Ream explains that “reciprocity will be difficult or impossible to develop and maintain if one partner in the relationship believes that they are and must be superior or in control”. (Ream 2010, para. 4)

Burris and Rempel (2008) stated that “involvement in an intimate relationship not only can affect how the self is perceived and evaluated but also can transform how the self perceives and responds to the rest of the world” (p. 944). When in a relationship, self-concept and perception changes, and individuals see themselves differently from when they were independent. The safety of being connected brings harmony and the self becomes entangled in the us and we of the relationship; thus while in a relationship, the self-image tends to adopt some of the beliefs, feelings, character, and qualities of the
intimate partner.

Research on transactive memory by Wegner, Erber, & Raymond (1991) has shown that people in close relationships rely on each other as repositories of shared information and often feel that they have lost some of their memories and knowledge if the relationship comes to an end. In most cases, in intimate partnerships, this phenomenon is harmless. However, in the case of a partnership with narcissistic traits, the memories are damaged from the trauma experienced, and the enmeshment is experienced as pathology.

The outcome of narcissistic and psychologically abusive relationships is that individuals suffer damaged egos, and ultimately become isolated. This is because humans thrive when their egos are validated by their loved ones. Self-esteem is reinforced when one finds a secure connection with a significant other. Rokach and Brock (1997) reinforce the idea that social support is fundamental to physical and emotional health. “Our well-being depends upon a social support that consists of emotional support, which involves communicating our care and concern.” (Cohen, 2004; Hogan, Linden & Najarian, 2002; Antonucci, 1985; House & Kahn, 1985, p. 20).

When a marital relationship comes to an intolerable point due to various circumstances, negative feelings can lead to depression, anxiety, and lasting loneliness. The spouse comes to a place where hope is gone and the self no longer exists. “Proximity to a loved one tranquillizes the nervous system...and is a natural antidote to feelings of anxiety and vulnerability” (Johnson, 2009, p. 5).

During a narcissistic marriage, when the roles are played undisturbed, certain healthy spouses may give a false sense of harmony. On the other end of the spectrum, unhealthy relationships can bring a spouse to complete disillusion and hopelessness. The
marriage turns into a destructive setting, capable of paralyzing the spouse in the non-
narcissistic role. Regardless of a destructive or non-destructive partnership, the marriage
becomes a “narcissistic marital system,” going beyond individual characteristics of the
husband and wife (Maltas, 1991, p. 571). As long as there is little deviation from the
standards of the silent agreement, a marital equilibrium can be established. However, this
agreement is seldom accomplished; one spouse is usually left to perish in selfless
emotions, like that character of Echo in the myth of Narcissus.

**Trauma-bond versus co-dependency**

Arabi (2016) challenges the notion that victims of narcissists are codependent and
argues the need to “stop stereotyping all abuse victims as codependent” as if they are to
blame for being abused. Arabi (2016) wrote:

> Contrary to popular myth, anyone can be victimized by an abuser, even one with
> strong boundaries initially, because covert abuse is insidious and unbelievably
> traumatic, resulting in symptoms of PTSD, Complex PTSD or, if they were abused
> by a malignant narcissist, what is known as Narcissistic Victim Syndrome.
> Remember that abuse involves a slow erosion of boundaries over time. The abuser
> first idealizes the victim, then begins to test and push the boundaries of the victim
> once he or she has already been conned into the relationship. Meanwhile, the
> survivor of abuse is like a frog in slowly boiling water, gaslit into believing that it is
> all their fault, not knowing the danger they’re in until it’s too late. (para. 2)

She goes on to explain that trauma-bonding is a survival mechanism which has
“little to do with codependency and everything to do with the traumatic effects of abuse”
(para. 8). The abuse causes the person to act codependent, but the codependency is not
necessarily a character trait that caused them to be in the situation.

This makes sense with regards to people who are the victims of narcissists, when one considers the seductive, insidious, parasitic approach of the narcissist. There is a sense that the partner of a narcissist has been emotionally ensnared, a form of relational entrapment. And so it may be more productive to help victims understand that being traumatically bonded to their abuser was an effort to survive rather than a codependent enabling of their abuser. The victim of a narcissist has already absorbed so much blame and shame for all the trouble in the relationship. Once a victim understands the effect of this trauma bond that created codependent behaviors, they can begin to release self-blame and break free of its chains (Arabi, 2016).
Chapter III Case Studies

The presentation of the cases portrays an experience of marriage with a narcissistic partner. Some of the behaviors previously discussed will come to life in this segment. This is a brief description of Kate, a woman treated in therapy who struggled with a narcissistic father, Kim who felt hostage to a narcissist, and Linn, who believed her life was in danger if she left her marriage.

Kate

Kate’s father was a pompously groomed narcissist, without a doubt, every aspect of his shallow life had the DSM diagnosis. He required perfection for himself and the image of his family, beautifully portrayed to the outside world. The children in that marriage were simple subjects of his picture-perfect life, where appearances were all that mattered. Affection was a given, but it only came when they were infants; as they grew they learned to not expect much more than eye glances and pats on their heads from the encapsulated father.

He was a handsome, well groomed, and dressed to impress kind of individual. He had a prominent job at the congress, was accomplished and confident; and all his possessions had to be top of the line. He walked in the clouds, too proud to observe who was surrounding him; he only had eyes for himself. He was authoritarian, intelligent, entertaining, and not surprisingly, an alcoholic.

As Dougherty & West (2007) described in the defense of devaluation, this man indeed treated his wife as a second class citizen; her opinion did not matter much, and she was an object he owned. She lived her marriage life walking on eggshells. It was obvious that the children were unhappy, but his wife was in love with him. Kate was the oldest
child; therefore, she had to take care of her mother when she fell apart after divorce. Once his perfect structure shattered, his wounded ego painfully made sure his ex would suffer the consequence of not wanting him anymore. His post separation vengeance came as he described each love affair he had while they were married; from the maid, to the neighbor, to her friends, and the list went on. His narcissistic injury was lessened by the injury he inflicted on his wife.

The children could not make sense of their lives. Later they realized that they lived in a script that was abandoned when they could not serve the narcissist’s purpose any longer. They played the role of a perfect intact family. When he left them, he didn't look back. He erased his family from his life, and started a new one promptly. While he was admirable, undoubtedly he displayed all the symptoms of full blown NPD. Kate explained later that her father was the reason she pursued the study of human behavior. She needed answers.

The interesting part of her script was that Kate was able to see the changes played before her eyes. Her mother was injured by depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, addiction to valium, and lived with a damaged ego and self-doubt for years after the divorce. After going through a process of self-recovery, she was able to collect the pieces and raise the children on her own. Kate discovered a new person being born. Her mother was forever changed. She became strong, independent, enthusiastic, and returned to being the person she was before marriage. She found herself again. Throughout her life, Kate encountered several women that fit her mother’s prognosis and wished she could help them. (K. Fuller, personal communication, November, 2015)

Kim
Kim married a narcissist and described how she desperately wanted to end her marriage but had two children with her spouse. Each time Kim got pregnant, it happened because she felt seduced. In fact, after the first child, Kim avoided her husband as much as she could, but she had to co-parent with him. After a while, Kim seemed to become entangled and coerced, and felt vulnerable. Catholic guilt led her to marry this man she did not love. As a typical narcissist, he often made her feel inadequate and inferior. As narcissistic victims often do, she thought she could fix the relationship, but her expectations were too high. After two years of marriage, her life was similar to a hostage situation, and she could not find an escape. Kim described that each time she expressed her desire to leave, he suddenly changed and was almost pathetic, he would become needy, which made her feel guilty and compassionate towards him.

He was indeed wounded, describing that his mother never loved him and preferred her own horses to her son. After meeting his parents, Kim indeed found his mother to be especially chilling and definitely treated her son condescendingly, was controlling, and disapproved of her son in every regard. Considering these factors, her spouse’s abusive traits and his past history of alcohol and cocaine abuse made sense. In the case of Kim, the prince charming phase, in which he used all his tactics to enchant her, was brief and only lasted a few months.

His narcissistic abuse was revealed very suddenly one day, uncovering his true personality, with unexpected abusive behaviors (verbal abuse, criticism, neglect). Having children to co-raise changed her priorities; it was enough to keep her in the relationship. If the circumstance were different, and there were no children involved, Kim believed the relationship would not have lasted. And for all his negative qualities, his strong will at
times made her feel safe. He was able to get his way with people, and Kim was attracted to his self-sufficiency and ability to influence others. This was a double-edged sword; this same energy could be turned against her, as was often the case.

Ultimately, he was able to control her because of his financial self-sufficiency, her concern for the kids, and his ability to keep her from seeing him as accountable for his actions because of her “compassionate” nature. The biggest factor in the difficult years they lived together was her fear of what he would do to her in the case of divorce. This is a common issue in many abusive relationships; she feared for herself and her children if she actually broke the bond. It would create a sense of low-level terror. As a last resource, they managed to come to couple’s therapy. For her it was in order to have a safe place to express her true feelings of trying to divorce, and to have a “witness” to the process as a form of protection. But the therapy became his way of targeting her for not wanting to take responsibility and work on what ailed the relationship.

Finally, after failed therapy, Kim found an escape from her low self-esteem by having an affair. She found someone who made her feel special, treated her with regard and respect, and allowed her to have her own feelings and thoughts. Her feelings of abandonment by her spouse were masked by newfound feelings of freedom within the affair. Even after the revelation of the affair, her narcissistic partner was afraid of losing his narcissistic supplier and decided he would forgive her if she would stay. Kim was able to break free; having a reciprocal love relationship with someone else made it worth taking the chance. It was clear that the high-conflict marriage relationship was harmful to her and her children. It was a difficult divorce. He started a bitter custody fight, full of high-conflict deception and character assassination on his part. He eventually used the
children as pawns to punish her. Kim described this as the most stressful time in her life. Her sense of self was affected, and she felt devalued, diminished, and isolated post-divorce. She still feels threatened by this man, who after 10 years still attempts to inflict damage to her self-esteem by criticism and mockery at nearly every encounter. (K. Berge, personal communication, May, 2016)

Linn

Linn reported being self-confident, outgoing, with many friends and healthy family support system. She had met her husband through a County event and the attraction was mutual, though he was more eager than she, to move quickly in the relationship. She became pregnant, they married, she quit her job and moved to a neighboring city with a better pay and position for the husband.

She noted that her husband became jealous, possessive, controlling after marriage and especially after the birth of the first child. He followed her, tapped her phone, told her how to dress, whom she could see and isolated her from her family. At home he became increasingly verbally abusive, demeaning her in front of the children, criticizing her appearance, behavior, family and parenting. Linn stated that after her first child she began to feel depressed, blaming it on post-partum hormones. That depression never lifted, and she felt like she had become a crumb on the floor.

The husband on the other hand, was narcissistic and grandiose, boasting about himself, his position and his unique skill sets. He took full responsibility for his perfect children, and took them and not her to his work events (picnics etc.), and ordered her to stay at home. His anger at her was escalating and included throwing things at her, holding
her head in the toilet, until she agreed to be a better-behaved wife. She was terrified of her husband.

Linn wanted to return to work, but her husband did not allow it, stating her duty was to be his wife, mother to the children, be respectful and honor him. She lost weight, became anxious, depressed and lost her self-worth. She had no friends but for the mothers she spoke with before and after preschool. Linn went to therapy at the encouragement of her mother. Gradually she gained enough insight and strength, to realize that she could not change him, this was not her fault, and that his narcissistic personality needed her and her behavior to support his fragile personality. Linn pulled away from her husband emotionally and physically and eventually filed for divorce. Her husband did everything he could to stop her independence, and was furious that she was dishonoring him in front of his friends, colleagues and family.

Five years after divorce, her self-esteem has improved, although she still suffers from panic attacks, her depression has lessened due to medication, exercise and therapy. She has moved back to her old town and reconnected to friends and family. She continues to get anxious when she leaves the house and always looks in the rear view mirror to see if he is following her. Linn continues to have symptoms of PTSD diagnosed by her physician and therapist. The ex-husband has remarried and tells their children and friends he has a “perfect and beautiful” new family (L. Mcfee, personal communication, March, 2017).
Chapter IV Theory

The theory of PTSED is based on the consequence of an intimate partner relationship where emotional safety is jeopardized and results in long-term loss of self-esteem to a non-narcissistic partner. The consequences of such a marital system may appear as an identity disorder, and perhaps feels like a malignant tumor that consumes a person from the inside out. In order to come out of such an enmeshed bond, a person needs to rediscover him or herself once again. In some circumstances, divorce may be the only way out. Because of the loss of individual identity within the marriage and the lack of a true self, deserting the position of being someone else’s mirror while disappearing in the process may require long post-divorce recovery.

This research, using findings of existing literature, explores the different facets of the intricate reality of narcissism in relationships. The women who are victimized by their partner’s personality disorder may experience slow recovery of their egos. Their self-esteem has been put to the test. Even though some authors describe self-esteem as not being an issue in the partner selection and relationship, these women experience what would be called post-traumatic self-esteem damage. This term explains a new type of PTSD, called PTSED (Post-Traumatic Self-Esteem Damage). It would be categorized as a mild form of PTSD, in which the victim may fully recover with time and proper treatment post-divorce. PTSD has been linked to experiencing traumatic interpersonal relationships when a partner is exposed to repeated physical or psychological abuse, or both. Herman, 1992; Pelcovitz et al., (1997) describe that “shame, dissociation, and dysregulation in relationships are symptom domains and experiences captured by the complex PTSD construct” (Cited in Dorahy, Corry, Black, Matheson, Coles, Curran,

During the marriage, the non-narcissistic partner is dissociated from herself, trying to cope with her partner’s demands; she is exposed to extreme anxiety while trying to maintain peace and sanity. Traumatic injury from narcissistic relationships is complex, recurring, and leaves long lasting psychological scars. Dorahy, et al. (2017), proposed that “dissociation and shame after exposure to trauma, especially of a repetitive and interpersonal nature, might actually provide a foundation for trauma disorders like PTSD, complex PTSD, and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)” (p. 440). Trauma may be experienced in many aspects of the relationship, including verbal and/or physical abuse, controlling behaviors, neglect, silent treatment, and narcissistic rage. All of these behaviors experienced repeatedly over time could cause damage to the ego and the self.

Complex trauma refers to a type of trauma that occurs repeatedly and cumulatively, usually over a period of time and within specific relationships and contexts. The term came into being over the past decade as researchers found that some forms of trauma were much more pervasive and complicated than others (Herman, 1992a, 1992b cited on Courtois, 2004, p. 412). Dorahy, et al. (2017) described:

While shame and dissociation are proffered as key antecedents to other complex trauma symptoms, all three constructs have been associated with distress in interpersonal relationships in traumatized individuals (Dorahy et al., 2013, 2015; Lyons-Ruth, 2003). Typically, such distress is conceived primarily as a consequence of shame, dissociation, and other complex PTSD symptoms (e.g., Dorahy et al., 2013; Mollon, 2006; Wilson et al., 2006). Drawing together the
theoretical and developing empirical literatures, pathological dissociation and shame may underpin other complex PTSD symptoms and produce more relationship distress, but complex PTSD symptoms may mediate the relationship between shame, dissociation, and relationship distress (p. 440).

In extreme cases, the self-esteem injuries are so severe that these women spend years restructuring their self-image. A good example of trauma comes from the case of victims of vindictive narcissistic partners; they are hostile individuals who make a mission of retaliation on whoever hurts their “precious pride” (Burgo, 2015). Burgo (2015) points out that those individuals “Have notoriously thin skin, often taking offense where none is intended. His hostile response to innocent remarks often baffles those on the receiving end of his vindictiveness because it seems so out of proportion to the perceived insult” (p.181), producing desperate attempt from the spouses to avoid any conflicts; in fact, these women report feeling too afraid to leave these individuals due to fear of retaliation. Often times they need to plan a safe escape for years prior to divorce. They fear for their lives and the lives of their children. This fear is a response to a threat that is imminent. The vindictive narcissist has a persistent need to win; therefore, if you challenge him, you become the enemy, and he will hurt the challenger until he wins. His vindictiveness may continue long after his enemy has quit fighting (Burgo, 2015).

These types of narcissists are the ones who inflict the most pain on their spouses before and after divorce, including during custodial battles that may last many years and cause much distress and anxiety. These individuals often exaggerate, lie, distort and rewrite facts, often portraying their ex-spouses as the problem. “For the
vindictive narcissist, the drive to prove oneself a winner and triumph over shame renders the truth irrelevant” (Burgo, 2015, p. 192). They go to extremes to make their ex-spouse’s lives miserable and do anything to prevent them from moving on.

Anyone who threatens to shame this type of narcissist will become a target. He may feel attacked by anyone who disagrees with him because he needs to be right all the time. He may find a way to be seen as the martyr or victim, by showing indignation and seeking approval from others, using false claims. He may retaliate by trying to destroy his ex-spouse’s reputation, even promoting the idea that she needs mental health treatment and he is sorry for her (Burgo, 2015). He may threaten his wife that if she leaves him, she will be sorry. He will seek revenge for being abandoned. His behavior is often “merciless,” “cold-blooded,” and sometimes downright inhumane (Burgo, 2015). This type of narcissist is the one some authors recommend “running away from.”

Once a woman decides to leave her vindictive narcissist, she starts a war in which she knows she may lose. Her self-preservation instinct may guide her to seek support, and that is when her battle to put herself together begins. She will have to put aside any optimistic future plans and first simply try to recover what is left of her ego. The only way to prevent more abuse would be to avoid the triggers from her ex-husband. “Rather than responding defensively, triggered by his nastiness and contempt, she needs to respond in neutral ways, focusing on the facts” (Burgo, 2015, p. 202). It becomes a survival method for dealing with the mean-spirited ex-spouse. Every interaction could be an opportunity to inflict pain, but only if she allows it. She needs to tell herself she will not give him permission to hurt her anymore. Once the
arduous recovery process begins, she may overcome the trauma experienced from years of psychological abuse from her vindictive spouse. If that happens, she may be on her way to a new life and a new self.

Abused and post-abused women, that is, those who have left an intimately abusive relationship, have been shown to experience PTSD. In a metanalysis of 11 studies, Golding (1999) reported that 31% to 84.4% of women who experienced intimate partner violence met PTSD criteria. In a study of 52 postabused women, 44% to 66% of the women were experiencing PTSD symptoms depending on measure, even though they had been out of the intimately abusive relationship approximately nine years (Woods & Wineman, 2004, p. 27). Dohary et al. (2017) explained that:

Shame and pathological dissociation were argued to have direct links to relationship distress in the form of relationship anxiety, relationship depression, and fear of intimate relationships, but these connections were also proposed to be mediated (indirect effect) by complex PTSD symptoms. (p. 440)

Dorahy et al. (2017) argue that shame is correlated with subordination and DID which may bring trauma and subsequently complex PTSD. “Cognitive appraisals associated with shame including beliefs of inferiority are likely to heighten fear of engaging in new relationships” (Dohary et al., 2017, p. 445). The painful memories of the past relationship due to neglect, devaluation, and criticism may exacerbate the trauma. There is fear of engaging in new relationships due to nervousness and anxiety because of the fear of re-experiencing the trauma. “The association between experiencing trauma and avoidance behaviors informs clinicians of a possible area for
intervention, that is, helping women find their voices, tell their stories, and become present to their authentic self” (Woods and Wineman, 2004, p. 27).

**Safeguards**

Abnormal mental health conditions are not predictable traits; it takes time to get to know a partner before any mental health issues are recognized. This is why so many women fall prey to narcissists. There is a rigidity in this personality disorder, but it is still difficult to forecast the unpredictable behavior of narcissists, mostly due to the charming undercover selves they are able to portray. They live in disguise, hiding their true selves from, at first, unsuspecting partners.

During the mate selection process, there is a deceit displayed in the way narcissists carry themselves at first. As McWilliams (1994) points out, “Preoccupied with how they appear to others, narcissistically organized people may privately feel fraudulent and loveless” (p.169). It works every time; the women feel special, and they hear exactly what they want to hear from their narcissistic partner. Narcissistic men feel the need to invest in appearances and tantalizing behaviors in order to be accepted.

The victim does not necessarily need to be a person who is vulnerable to such traits; anyone can fall for a narcissist. An important question to ask is: who are the women who stay in such relationships and prevail? On the one hand are those who are the caregivers, compassionate, the vulnerable and selfless kind; on the other hand are those who are independent, self-sufficient, and strong willed, but still fall in love with narcissists. It is important to consider how and when they were seduced. This information may tell more about a woman’s vulnerability to being involved with a
narcissist. Some women may be just tired of searching for the right person; then a charming man treats them right, looks like what they have been searching for all their lives, and steals their hearts. They forget that what looks too good to be true, probably is. Perhaps it is related to age; perhaps they are getting too old to start a family, and would tolerate more than usual to make it work. Perhaps they are simply too naïve. Snyder & Whisman (2003) explained that:

> In the average courtship, a state of narcissistic overvaluation happens normally. People fall in love and each thinks the other is wonderful. When one of the lovers is a narcissist, this state of finding the self and the other wonderful may be prolonged into marriage to a ridiculous extent that does violence to the reality of the spouse or it may give way to profound disappointment when expectations are not met (p. 287).

**Sexual Connection**

Another theory less obvious yet described by some women is that they may get emotionally attached to the narcissist prematurely, through sexual connection. It may be due to gender differences in the emotional bonding factors of sex; but it is more likely that women become emotionally bonded after intimate relations. A predominant theme for women with narcissistic men is going from dating Prince Charming to being emotionally entangled with Mr. Alarming. There is something to say for taking prolonged time to learn if someone is worthy of giving your trust to and worth your emotional investment. A woman needs to know where and how she gets emotionally hooked, and should be very honest with herself about this. If being sexually involved pulls her into a premature emotional investment with a man, she should be careful to find out if the man
is who he says he is. In some cases, what the narcissist male is trying to get from women at first is another sexual conquest. He is not trying to get to know women nor looking for a lasting relationship; and some women stay long enough for this charade to end. Vaknin (2016) said:

All narcissists abhor intimacy and use sex as a weapon. Somatic narcissists “masturbate with partners” whereas cerebral narcissists, males in particular, despise women and view sex with them as a “chore.” Cerebral’s only have it on occasion to keep their source of supply (their partner) from leaving them (para. 13).

Not Always All That Bad

The concept of a relationship with a narcissist being solely a negative experience is untrue. The reason some women stay in these relationships for so many years may be because they, too, benefit from the glamour of being in the shadow of a celebrity. Some of the women also experience a share of the stardom. They rarely feel valued by the narcissist, but they may feel valued by the outside world that views their lives as more than perfect, living with such a distinguished being. One thing that narcissists have in common is that they are generous gift givers. They have incredible taste; they need to impress even at gifting. The recipient is often in awe and that is what is expected, a surprised reaction. The unpredictability of the gifts is another way they impress their partners. An expensive vacation, diamonds, romantic getaways may be just the way to get forgiveness for bad behavior, even though they only mean to impress and make their partners forget that they were previously disheartened and upset.
The woman who is able to live under the shadow of the narcissist has to learn to compromise. Perhaps if her needs are attended to, she may endure some psychological abuse. As an example, as long as she can spend his money, have her spectacular estate, or have someone else provide her with the attention she needs (an affair), the relationship may work. At times this may be the perfect trade, one that may work for both parties. If both partners play their parts undisturbed, they may pretend to have a perfect marriage, as long as the non-narcissistic partner provides her narcissist with his narcissistic supply.

**Implications to Self-esteem Recovery**

Some women in the literature had to endure near a decade of custody battles, divorce re-negotiations, and loss of financial stability, but the most damaging effect comes from the constant contact with their predators. This continued contact after divorce perpetuates the damage by reminding these women of an era of self-annihilation they experienced during the relationship. In a divorce situation, most women experience a similar sense of loss of love and connection, defeat, and failure. In the narcissistic partnership, the loss comes mostly for the non-narcissistic partner who lost herself in the process.

Several women partners of narcissists have described issues with self-esteem many years after divorce. Every time their ex-partners are around, often because of child exchange, they are reminded of how their ex-partners saw them as incompetent, stupid, undisciplined, and irresponsible. They still feel like they are stepping on eggshells in order to avoid criticism. Most of the women are able to have mature conversations with their children in order to prevent them from internalizing or
believing their father’s negative remarks about the mother. Regardless of post-divorce comments by the narcissists, inevitably most women have, by then, unfortunately internalized the long-standing negative messages received during the relationship.

Some women are able to come around and recover from the wounds. Recovery is a slow process in which they need to rediscover themselves gradually, trying to remember who they were before the relationship. Even though, the constant triggers of the relationship may make them feel bad. They have their inner voice conversations: “I cannot believe I fell for that,” or “What was I thinking?” “How did I not see it coming?” These are traumatic reminders of the time when they were blindsided by romance, while being submitted to distress.

These women may go to the process of being the critical blamer, or feeling as the victim again, and may finally accept that they are better off now, becoming proud of themselves for their bravery. Some of the women have difficulty beginning another relationship, mostly because they are afraid of falling for the same trap. In fact, some describe being generally distrustful, and naturally, have a hard time letting themselves be loved again. It would take a lot of effort for a woman coming out of a narcissistic marriage to allow someone in her life. She may feel distrust of anyone who tries to become too close. These women may seek background checks and accounts from previous relationships, but mostly they simply need time to trust again. Rightfully so, they need to safeguard themselves from psychological predators. Time is indeed the best medicine. While they find purpose in their lives again, they will encounter love once more.
Reclaiming the Self

In order for the women in these relationships to recover from the traumatic experience, they need to undergo a period of self-compassion and healing. Repairing their sense of self is not an easy task, since most of them took years to develop their identities in their early years. They lose part of that from years of being devalued, disrespected, and unappreciated. One common consequence is that these women have difficulty defining their sense of identity. As Berman (2015) points out, the woman disappears in the process of being married to a narcissist. The process of recovery starts by her taking baby steps towards rebuilding confidence and establishing independence. “Women's management of their personal and professional lives after divorce is sometimes an extended struggle to reconstruct their selves for the sake of self-preservation” (Schalkwyk, 2005, p. 91).

During the process of disconnection from the relationship, these women experience symptoms other than psychological distress. “While working through their feelings of loss and disengaging from the relationship, women experience both physical and psychological effects that negatively impact on their sense of self “(Schalkwyk, 2005, p. 93). Their bodies may tell the story; they may experience several psychosomatic symptoms that do not seem related to any identifiable source. The persistent discontent appears in the form of aches and pains, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, stomach pains, ulcers, headaches, migraines, and other ailments that may have no medical explanation. “Tiredness, illness, a feeling that life is not worth living, self-hate, and depression emerge as ways in which women express their sense of themselves as helpless in face of supposedly insoluble problems.” (Schalkwyk,
If They Stay: Therapy, Therapy, Therapy

While some authors believe in the healing power of therapy for such individuals, others recommend running away from such relationships before it’s too late. My recommendation to these women would be to measure where in the spectrum their narcissist partner falls, then make the decision on therapy vs. divorce. If being the victim is where they stand, they should move towards finding their strength and sense of self. They need to devote some time to reflect on their relationships, and this is often a painful process. Schalkwyk (2005) explained:

Retelling the story we live by is a way in which we reconstruct our sense of self as women who are single again. Through the telling we recognize that the 'failed' relationship was not just due to our own supposed 'weaknesses' and we begin to re-conceptualize our ex-partners, looking differently at the person with whom we constructed certain realities and without whom we now have to face the future. We begin to tell a new story, create new memories, find new spaces in which to express our talents and uniqueness, and make new friends to support our reconstructed selves. Drawing on our strengths and expertise to manage our personal and professional lives, we do not allow the past to maintain any form of power over us. (p. 94)

Solomon (1992) believes that no matter how severe the disorder, there is always a basic human need for being loved and accepted in the relationship. She says there is considerable possibility of a positive relationship based on “rebuilding the structures of the self” (p. 164). The combined effort of therapist, husband and wife makes the
prognosis quite surprising. Both partners learn to use intolerable feelings to heal the relationship in the safe environment of therapy. “The goal is to encourage self-observation and self-understanding when hurt, anger, or humiliation arises in interactions” (p.164). It is indeed arduous work for everyone, but the possibility of change and growth is worth the time. “Partners learn new ways to respond to each other constructively, and they then use this knowledge to enhance life between sessions and upon termination” (p.164).

As Behary (2013) recommends, the women must find the FORCE within them in order to sustain the marriage (p.171). The FORCE is an acronym for:

- **Flexibility** - Try to avoid rigid thinking, adjust phrases and responses to fit the situation;
- **Openness** – Be less judgmental and a better listener
- **Receptivity** – Be fully present in all aspects (eye contact, body language, tone of voice)
- **Competence** – Be an authentic, sensitive, empathic listener, yet firm and credible
- **Enlightment** – Be insightful and interested in exchanging ideas and solutions.

Behary (2013) suggests that the FORCE is a powerful resource to master effective communication. Implementing these skills may require time and patience, but it can create “a rewarding and reciprocal relationship with the narcissist” (p.172).

Stanley, Markman, Peters and Leber (1995) have a formula for predicting divorce by analyzing risk factors in a relationship. They emphasize a formula called
PREP – the (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) to help couples stay connected. The author believes in helping couples after their problems have become severe enough for them to seek therapy (Stanley et al., 1995). The program is more educational than therapeutic. It teaches the couple skills and ground rules to handle conflicts and promote intimacy. The technique is designed to promote positive interaction by teaching partners different ways to handle negative affect constructively. It uses some cognitive interventions to help partners understand the tendency to distort perceptions of one another and to use presuppositions, which can often be very negative (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990). These presuppositions and distorted perceptions are highly destructive because they turn the communication into a ghostly non-existent interaction, commonly found in narcissistic relationships.

“What helps the narcissistic person come out of the cocoon is a favorable environment in which past traumas can be remembered, unhooked from their present incarnation in the marriage, reworked in safety over time, and so detoxified” (Snyder & Whisman, 2003, p. 289). These authors believe that a long-term, psychodynamic approach would be the best therapeutic option for such relationships. They recommend an object relations approach to help make any change in such marriages.

Snyder & Whisman (2003) suggested:

Couples with a narcissistic partner are hard to engage and difficult to treat. The therapist must take a long-term view of the case. A few sessions getting at the symptoms and the couple’s complaints about each other may make a dent in the armor, but it will only increase the need for better armor. We advise the therapist to take time to get to know the couple and to let the couple build trust (p. 289).
In the therapeutic process, the couple needs to work on avoidance and lack of trust in the beginning sessions so that the therapist may assess any anxiety resulting from the interactions.

An object relations approach is based on the way the personality is formed as a system that is built from the experiences with the family of origin. Snyder and Whisman (2003) state that “The state of being in love offers hope of acceptance of these hidden parts of the self” (p. 289). These experiences, whether positive or negative, are going to play out in relationships. It will determine the quality and length of the marriage. The therapist must observe how the narcissist plays the game, often denying any responsibility and blaming their partner for everything. Interventions are often seen as “destructive to their ego” (Snyder and Whisman, 2003, p. 292)

Regardless of the type and where in the spectrum the narcissist is, the relationship will be a one-sided dysfunctional experience if not treated. “Interventions directed toward narcissistic personality should continue to consider the impact of these traits on relationship partners, and potentially incorporate intervention foci on effective communication in intimate relationships” (Lamkin, Lavner, Shaffer, 2017, p. 227). It requires much effort to work out the dysfunctional dynamic and make it functional for both partners. It is not an impossible task, but it requires work and dedication. In fact, therapy should be a priority from the beginning. Once the intolerable behaviors are under control, a non-narcissistic partner may enjoy the glamour of being in the shadow of a narcissist. These relationships are intense, more than the average, but if balance is acquired, it may be a fulfilling experience.
For the women who are unable to change the dysfunctional dynamic, they are left to drift aside an absent, non-existent partner while they drown on their own. Helplessness, hopelessness, and isolation are their companions. Once these women escape, they have to live with what they have internalized in the process, including years to relinquish their PTSED. Nothing is more important to them than to overcome their trauma and move on, and they need all the help they can get.
Chapter V Discussion

The goal of any relationship should be to foster a safe place for two individuals to thrive in a positive environment. Each person should benefit from the relationship equally and be able to keep growing as individuals while also elevating the union, the “coupledom” (Roseneil, 2006). There must first be a foundation of openness and trust so that communication can be real and honest. Partners must actually learn to see who the other person really is, beyond the fantasy of the romance phase.

For intimacy to grow there must be mutual investment and for this there must be trust that one partner will not trample over the other partner, or exploit the other for his or her own personal empowerment. In other words, a couple is a team and there is a delicate balance that keeps relationships healthy so that both partners benefit equally form the union, or coupledom. The difficulty in assessing the health of any relationship in a counseling situation is that what makes people feel that they are benefitting from a relationship is unique to each person. And here lies the challenge in addressing how to respond to women who love narcissists. There is no general case scenario, though there may be commonalities.

One thing in common is that the romance phase in dating the narcissist is faster and more intense, and the woman gets entangled quickly in a rather unguarded way before she really knows his true colors. So with blinders of passion on, she may have gotten pregnant with his child, married on a romantic whim, or just given her heart over to some illusion before testing the reality. She may assume he is trustworthy before testing to see if he really is worthy of her trust. But every relationship, once past the excitement of the romance phase, seems to boil down to the rather practical stuff of
fairness in exchange of time, resources, and emotional investment. And this is when the narcissist becomes the huge problem for the woman who falls for him so quickly.

The blinders start to peel away as she starts triggering her mate’s narcissistic wound, pulling her into a world of drama she never expected. He will create drama about everything and she will find herself paralyzed, walking on eggshells, trying to avoid hidden landmines. He will find fault with everything and diminish his partner every chance he gets. After having figured out what might make her feel insecure, he will target that. She finds she may not have her own opinion about the most trivial thing without it being considered threatening to him and cause for a fight.

As reported by a client, whenever she stands up for herself in any way, he will punish her, and she will start to fear his rage and worry about the potential of that rage. Eventually, she feels like a prisoner in a relationship that she cannot exit safely. So why not just leave the man making you miserable? People who do not consider the intricacies and many leveled entanglements of relationships are often quick to judge victims of such abuse rather harshly, with shallow assumptions that they must be masochists or want to be abused. These people underestimate the power of fear that underlies the situation.

She would leave if she were free to, but maybe she has children with him, maybe she is financially dependent on him, maybe she feels religious obligations to stay, maybe there are other saving face social pressures to staying. She may have once been a happy person with self-esteem and been more discerning, but now she’s a doormat to a tyrant, thanks to a survival mechanism called “trauma bonding” (Herman, 1995), a phenomenon similar to hostage victims who learn to cope with and relate to those holding them hostage in a way that maximizes their survival chances.
The narcissist is a hostage taker as well. He does not court the woman in the normal sense of the word, of getting to know her and being interested in her character and personality; rather, he seduces and conquers her. From the literature, it is clear that male narcissists are known to have more sexual partners and encounters. The narcissist is not looking for a relationship but a conquest to stroke his ego. Sex is a conquest for him, not an expression of loving intimacy, and he has learned what signals to send women so that they lower their guard. One article mentioned that narcissists often learn what signals lower a woman’s natural guard and make her more vulnerable.

**Living on Hope**

At first, women with narcissistic partners keep hoping that the man they first encountered will come back. They may keep trying, but eventually they become aware that they have been doing all the sacrificing to try to make it a real relationship. The women learn to surrender and sacrifice (Behary, 2013). It is a totally dysfunctional dynamic. When a couple shows up in therapy because the wife feels like she is going crazy (the narcissist only sees therapy as a place to point out the partner’s faults and would not likely go on his own), then the big question for therapists is: Is there really any hope for the relationship? And how would a therapist be able to assess if there is any room for growth? Of course there is a NPD spectrum, but for women with full blown NPD partners, I would recommend that they consciously identify what are the factors that keep them enmeshed and try to prepare a safe exit strategy.

The narcissist is not capable of a relationship that builds up both partners, because he is so wounded that he subconsciously must exploit his partner to build himself up. It is an unconscious “survival” mechanism, a schema he learned when he failed to
receive unconditional nurturing from his primary caregiver (usually his mother) in the earliest developmental years when the child needs to receive feedback from his mother that he is worthy and is loved. This is the love that allows a person to feel their value regardless of circumstances later. If the narcissist possessed this innate positive self-love, he would not panic when the water muddies his reflection, he would not fear the loss of himself and then subconsciously kill the esteem of his partner to compensate for his lack of self-worth.

The mirroring of love from parent to child is the foundation of our innate sense of self-esteem and worthiness. Healthy innate esteem develops from the unconditional love of parents, and allows the child to see this value in himself and in those around him. Without healthy esteem, a person will always need to trump other people and “exploit” others to build themselves up. Negative self-esteem is characteristic of the bully.

The narcissist will emotionally exploit and bully his partner, and it will all be subconsciously driven. He cannot fix that of which he is not aware. Positive relationship is just not possible where there is no safe zone for intimacy. The woman learns she cannot speak any of her truth to the narcissist without triggering her narcissistic mate’s insecurities. To stay in such a relationship means to be in exile, to not be herself, to be afraid to speak up, and to give up on having a relationship with emotional intimacy. To stay means to live in fear, and the fear is different for each woman. It might be economic fear, social fear, or maybe she is actually afraid for her life if she attempts to leave.

**Role of Intimidation**

Intimidation is prominent part of the narcissist’s *modus operandi*. In some cases, women with narcissistic men find intimacy by forming a relationship with another man,
and eventually having an affair. Sometimes the affair helps the woman have courage to leave the narcissistic relationship, but this can be dangerous if the narcissist seeks revenge. These women, as in most divorce cases, must come to terms with getting rid of the abuse for some tradeoff. For example, leaving him may mean having to do with less economically, or having to deal with friends and/or family who don’t understand, or still having to co-parent kids with him, or having to move far away so he can never bother her again. But the detachment process will have to include much more, such as finding self-esteem and confidence again, and learning to trust.

To sum things up, in sizing up whether a situation is improvable for a woman with a narcissistic male, everything depends on degree and of course what the value exchange is for being in the relationship. For example, one woman might be perfectly fine being in an unbalanced relationship and be happy to stroke her narcissistic male’s ego in exchange for the fact that he is wealthy; as long as she can escape for her spa days, she may endure the situation. Some women may prefer this to supporting themselves financially. Or perhaps she has managed to find herself a way to compensate for her lack of intimacy by pursuing her dream career and keeping herself busy elsewhere. Another may stay because of the kids at first, but in the end, realize the dysfunction the kids are witnessing might be more damaging, and try to find an exit strategy in divorce. This can be very tough as narcissistic males are known to be extremely antagonistic in divorce/custody cases. They see the children as an extension of themselves and may wage full on war on the other parent. Women in this situation need to be provided a lot of support to wage this war.
From experience, knowing and reading about women in divorce with narcissistic men, it seems that judges are shamefully lacking in education or concern on this matter. The safety of the woman and children involved should be considered above all else. In many cases, the judges, not knowing who they are dealing with, will consider giving 50/50 custody to a father who is unfit to parent, but is simply good at hiding his faults (Duffy & Jacquin, 2017). That parent may continue his verbal and psychological abuse of the children if given partial custody after the divorce.

It would be ideal to make sure that our legal system be aware of this maladaptive personality trait and its malignant behaviors. Being aware of the psychological damage inflicted on the spouse would be a first step to protecting her and the children from continued abuse. If there is evidence of psychological damage done to the woman, the narcissistic partner should be forced to financially cover psychological treatment for the upcoming years, as much as she requires. This action would provide an opportunity for treatment, increase educational awareness for the public, and would ensure the emotional and psychological well-being of the woman.

In most cases, women who stay married to narcissistic partners, hope that their partner will eventually change one day. Some divorces happen after fifty plus years of trying to make the marriage work. It is not to say that there is no way to manage such relationships, but it is a fact that personality disorders are extremely difficult to change. The narcissistic partner must have absolute investment in keeping the relationship while trying to manage the symptoms of the disorder. It can be done; it is rare, but nonetheless it is possible. Ultimately, this research was done to study what happens to the women after divorce, and the literature shows that they suffer some psychological damage post-
divorce. Consequently, these women will need more support than normal, and psychological treatment for recovery from their distressing experience.

Ultimately, this dissertation was written because of the need to bring understanding and provide a more comprehensive, in-depth look at the psychological effect on the non-narcissistic partner after divorce. Following the integrated approach, the work of Solomon, Maltas, Akhtar, Kohut, Behary, Cannonville and many others was used. These theorists have focused on different aspects of the relationship, but few have focused much on the psychological consequences of those relationships. Some authors believe that the non-narcissistic partner’s best option is to flee as far and as fast as possible in order to be safe from narcissistic abuse. Others believe that therapy can help in some cases.

The varying perspectives and disparity of opinions of experts on narcissism bring more questions than answers. What happens to a woman who has been exposed to the dysfunctional personality traits of a narcissist is a topic that would best be examined in an extended longitudinal timeframe study of post-divorce women. Many aspects of a woman’s quality of life and emotional well-being following divorce with a narcissist would come to life. “Through divorce, previous construction of self, particularly of self as relational being, is largely lost. Sometimes the sense of loss appears before the actual divorce, leading to negative talk about the self, and devaluing the self” (Schalkwyk, 2005, p. 92).

Ryff (1991) also refers to the relational self as a dimension through which adults experience psychological well-being when they establish (and sometimes renew) warm and satisfying relationships with people, concern themselves with the
welfare of others, and thus construct interdependent selves as women who care.

The loss of a relational self thus brings a sense of failure. (cited in Schalkwyk, 2005, p. 93)

Some of these women were ashamed for not leaving soon enough; they blame themselves for letting their spouses walk all over them. They feel weak and cannot answer others as to why they did leave, because most people do not know what is happening inside the family’s perfect household. Women feel the need to explain themselves and try to justify the reason they left. In the process, they are also able to hear themselves; therefore, they feel more convinced that they did the right thing. They experience a crisis that may last years before they are able to make any sense of it. “The sense of failure and loss of self-worth that women experience after divorce are closely connected with fear that often emerges even before the actual break-up, particularly where violence or emotional abuse are present” (Schalkwyk, 2005, p. 94).

In extreme cases, they live in survival mode for the most part. These women go through the process of reconstructing their shattered selves. As Farrell (1996) describes “Leaving consists of reconnecting the fragments of the self by putting the abuse experience into perspective and developing a sense of wholeness” (p. 80 cited from Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). Schalkwyk (2005) said:

In my own experience, reconstruction could only really start once I managed to forgive myself for my supposed failure in the relationships and share the responsibility. Through forgiveness of herself and the other party a woman regains a sense of self that has agency and she can start rebuilding her life, disallowing the 'failure' discourse power over her future actions and
relationships (p. 93)
Chapter VI Conclusion

PTSED

The theory developed is called PTSED (Post Traumatic Self-Esteem Damage). By conducting research on several aspects of intimate relationships versus narcissism, it has been concluded that there is enough evidence correlating a narcissistic relationship to a traumatic experience. Trauma as we know it is an experience which leaves some form of sequela to the victim. Therefore, the trauma experienced by women exposed to persistent psychological abuse due to marrying a narcissist has clear consequences on their self-esteem, as evidenced by personal accounts and the literature. Since the damage is often afflicted on a woman’s sense of self, her esteem, and sometimes even an attack on her character, instead of physical bruises, the damage almost always goes unnoticed, hence the need to clarify and educate the public of these findings.

This research reviews the work of numerous scholars and reports their findings to guide spouses, psychologists, judges, and therapists in understanding the dynamics of relationships where one of the partners is a narcissist. The findings describe dysfunctional interactions with the primary caregivers during early childhood development which affect infant recognition of affection and disrupt child/caregiver bonding. Therefore many aspects of intimate relationships are affected later in life. Not only are there possibilities of problematic interpersonal relationships, but relationships in general may be compromised.

Practitioners from several schools of thought have agreed that narcissists and borderline clients may be the most difficult clients to work with. The literature contributes to this belief, since most narcissists either avoid therapy or present to therapy
for personal gain and few for personal growth and the desire to change. However, there is reason to believe that narcissists are able to acquire significant partnerships if only they are able to have humility and insight into their maladaptive behaviors. While seeking psychological help, they may be able to detect and understand how the behaviors affect others around them.

Relationships involving narcissists exhibit an unrealistic connection in the beginning, only to deteriorate into unpleasant altercations and distrust if the rules are not followed in favor of the narcissist. Several women in the literature have designated themselves as hostage to their relationships. This elicits the question of why they stay in those hurtful relationships. The answer is not so simple; there are many factors that influence their decisions to stay, such as financial, children, culture, and emotional attachment. There are many reasons for persistence in trying to fix what is not working, but in most of the cases, the women blame themselves for whatever is not working.

Lack of self-esteem of the partners of narcissists was often cited as a factor in women choosing narcissistic partners, although some authors describe strong, independent and self-sufficient women who fell in love with narcissists. The bewildering charm, strength, romance and other qualities the narcissist portrays at first sight will not last long, as has been described. The tactic is simply a stunning way to attract their mate into lust and submission. It works remarkably well, since most women fall for the attractiveness of the first encounter. What looks too good to be true, in fact, is.

Considering that the relationships are at first perfect, the women whose partners are narcissists tend to try to pursue the impossible task of trying to bring back the person they once fell in love with. Throughout their time together, the memories of the once
passionate moments become their prison. They try to make things right, because it is puzzling to them how someone could have changed so much. The literature reports that narcissists play a game of catch but do not release with their partners, and the partners become their source of narcissistic supply. Without their narcissistic supplier, they have difficulty relating to themselves. Narcissists have a fragile ego, damaged from childhood neglect, demands, or overindulgence.

In order to recognize the narcissistic abuse delivered in the relationship (in the form of name calling, silent treatment, criticism, and blaming, to name a few), women with narcissistic partners must first recognize that they have control over their lives. Mostly, they must understand that their partners are the ones with the problem, not them, and that they cannot fix their partners. This seems to be the most complicated adjustment, because some have been so entangled in their marriage that they have a hard time seeing the big picture. Narcissists tend to make their partners feel guilty for things for which they know they have no blame, but they doubt themselves regardless. The non-narcissistic partner grants the narcissist the right to hostile and demeaning behavior towards herself without noticing it.

The literature mentions the effects of current narcissism in youth as a generational issue, showing that, as a nation, America has become more narcissistic with time. Although research shows that narcissism decreases with age, the assumption that narcissism may change with age is controversial. My experience with elderly clients with NPD traits shows that they are as difficult to interact with as young narcissists. Entitlement is a factor that seems to become stronger with age. More studies need to be done on the relationship between narcissism and aging.
As a couple struggles with maintaining a relationship, the narcissist seems to be the one who has the upper hand in most of the couple’s interactions. The partner has to go along with the script without interrupting the ego ride of the narcissistic partner. There is evidence that suggests that a non-narcissistic partner suffers from a long lasting identity crisis. They seem to want to fix the relationship, but there is also the urge to flee from the traumatic experience. There are those scholars who believe the partner is in a hostage situation, much like the Stockholm Syndrome, where they feel so attached to their narcissistic spouse that they endure years of psychological abuse. The forecast for them is years of trying to recover lost parts of themselves, along with their self-esteem. Such traumatic experiences are difficult to understand in the context of a marriage, where the most valuable assets should be trust, connection, and intimacy.

Women need years to recover from the damaged self-esteem suffered from years of narcissistic abuse by their partners. The damage they experience affects future relationships, their health, and their emotional well-being. Divorce settlements should include a clause that dictates years of psychotherapy paid by their narcissistic spouses. In therapy, the therapist’s inquiring questions may help both client and therapist understand the nature of the impact from the relationship (Appendix A). This would be a way to psycho-educate the public on the damaging effects of narcissism to intimate relationships in general. If “knowledge is power” (Sachs, 1997), then educating the public about the suffering of these women will help empower them to find their voices again; and for those still in a narcissistic relationship, education will help them to understand that they are experiencing pure abuse, nothing less.
The female non-narcissistic partner is the one who needs all the support, post-divorce, and research shows the correlation to a trauma similar to PTSD. This led to my theory of PTSED (Post Traumatic Self Esteem Disorder), not far from post-traumatic symptoms in other contexts, but distinguishing itself as a self-esteem trauma that needs to be treated and repaired. With time and the appropriate support, the prognosis is very good for these women; most are able to heal and move on to new fulfilling relationships. What they can tell you about their experience with a narcissist is that they have learned to recognize and avoid any contact with individuals demonstrating similar traits. These women learn to protect themselves. Most of all, they have learned to be more resilient and stronger years later.

The extensive review of the literature gathered here reveals an observed aspect of the personalities of women who entered relationships with deficits men which runs counter to popular opinion on the subject. Generally, women who are demeaned, dismissed or even abused by their partners are seen as weak, submissive and incapable of standing up for themselves. Clearly this research calls for a very different assessment, one that is predictive of successful treatment in therapy. The narcissist typically chooses women who are capable of meeting his needs for ego support. Not only should she be attractive, but she should be a social asset. Even more importantly, she should be strong enough to meet his constant need for empathy and support. She also should not be a needy or dependent person, but have the capacity for nurturing and caring interactions even under difficult circumstances, suggesting that she may have had adequate mothering herself, as opposed to his deficits in being nurtured.
These inherent traits in the woman fit well for her successful growth and healing in therapy and encourage professionals to look at these patients in a new way, as very promising candidates for therapy, having beneath the years of abuse treatment, an inherent strength, an ability to experience empathy for themselves and heal their wounds, becoming respectful of their own capacities for happiness.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

More research in the several areas involving the pre-marital, marital and post-marital aspects of the narcissistic relationship would be beneficial. A longitudinal approach would unveil behaviors that may help us understand more in depth the relationship dynamic. Furthermore, a qualitative phenomenological approach could be used to better investigate the many aspects of the narcissistic relationship more closely. A qualitative methodology known as phenomenological method could be utilized. This method is based on the study of the lived experience of participants.

According to Snygg and Combes (1949), this method, in order to identify the essence of the matter, requires the researcher to describe things as they appear. Essential pieces should be isolated and the phenomena will then be exposed. Every substantial detail described by the women in the study done should be accounted for with careful interpretation. A phenomenological research would have led to a better understanding of why the ex-spouse’s behavior had some influence on how the women see themselves post-divorce. This methodology would guide future researches to get first-hand information from the women, be able to listen and interpret their stories in a more personal yet structured level. Kvale (1996) noted:

The journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveler might change as
well. The journey might instigate a process of reflection that leads the interviewer to new ways of self-understanding, as well as uncovering previously taken-for-granted values and customs in the traveler’s home country… Through conversations, the traveler can also lead others to new understanding and insight as they, through their own storytelling, may come to reflect on previously natural-seeming matters of course in their culture (p.4).

**Limitations**

A major limitation is the lack of research done on women with narcissistic traits. There is not enough data on women who display narcissistic abuse within relationships and/or have narcissistic traits. Moreover, there is not enough literature done on homosexual couples and how narcissism affects their relationships. The consequences of homosexuality may not be fully understood within the concept of narcissistic relationships.

A qualitative or quantitative study with a wider demographic variety and a more diverse socio-economic group of participants would give better insight to the collection of data. After all, there is not enough information to compare this group of individuals from the norm, and in the end, be able to analyze the effects of such relationships post-divorce. There is room for a lot more research in many areas of the subject.

**Summary**

The findings across studies are similar when it comes to the effect of narcissism in relationships. It is shown that there are several aspects of the narcissistic relationship that seem difficult to manage. Narcissistic traits have been seen in teenage years as a normal part of development. When it persists into adulthood, it may become an impairing
disorder. In such adults, the pathology affects the way they interact in intimate partner relationships. Not only is there a high risk for emotional disconnection from the non-narcissistic partner, but also there is little hope for repairing the relationship. Non-narcissistic partners are often vulnerable and at risk of anxiety and depression. Although there are cases where the partnership may be balanced and the behaviors may be controlled, in those cases, continuous help from a health professional is crucial.

Much of the literature is primarily focused on the effect of narcissism in the lives of women married to narcissistic men. There is need for research in a wider variety of relationships. There is an abundance of studies done on the partner without narcissism, although it would be interesting to analyze the narcissist and their own internal experience. When it comes to full blown narcissism, there is little evidence of the positive aspect in relationships. The significance of identity loss and low self-esteem in women is a concern in this study, and evidence shows that they need more post-divorce time and support in order to recover from the trauma than women in a non-narcissistic relationship.

Narcissistic traits may also be related to ambitious and successful entrepreneurs, artists and major historical figures; such literature was not included in the research. Narcissists tend to be highly successful in other aspects of their lives due to their overachieving qualities and persistent drive. Ultimately, further research in the subject would bring more clarity to the field of psychology and intimate partnerships in general.
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ROLE OF NARCISSISM IN RELATIONSHIPS


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Appendix A: PTSED Questionnaire

The following are questions which may be used to help better understand and treat clients:

**During the length of your marriage:**

1. Did you ever feel devalued, diminished, disrespected, silenced, powerless?
2. Have you ever felt that your opinions and wishes were not only ignored but also attacked?
3. Did you experience the destruction of trust in your relationship?
4. Were you ever confronted with an attack to your integrity (accusations of unfaithfulness)?
5. Did you feel isolated from your friends and family?
6. Did you avoid being honest for fear of retaliation (financial, emotional, physical, social)?
7. Did you ever feel punished for something unknown to you?
8. Did you lose interest in activities that you used to enjoy before the marriage?
9. Did you ever feel afraid for your life?

**Post-marriage**

1. Do you feel afraid for your life?
2. Do you have recurring dreams about still being married?
3. Do you wake up frightened or terrified by those dreams?
4. Do you have emotional reactions when something reminds you of the relationship (anxiety)?
5. Have you felt overwhelmed by a sudden return of the feeling of threat to your
sense of self (identity)?

6. Do you ever re-experience a threat to your sense of personal value?

7. Do you often feel upset at something that reminds you of your relationship?

8. Do you avoid external reminders of any situation which might trigger the fear experienced in the relationship?

9. Do you blame yourself for breaking up the family structure?

10. Do you believe you have lost self-esteem?

11. Do you often have strong negative feelings such as fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame?

12. Do you feel distant or cut off from people?

13. Do you rarely experience positive feelings?

14. Are you often irritable, angry or inappropriately aggressive?