

Chapter One

What Makes a Narcissist?

In Greek mythology, so the Roman poet Ovid tells us, Narcissus was the extraordinarily beautiful son of a minor god. He was so handsome that all the nymphs of the woods, where he went often to hunt, were in love with him. But he shunned them all. One day a maiden who had tried in vain to attract him uttered a prayer that he might some time or other feel what it was to love and not have that love returned. The avenging goddess Juno heard and granted the prayer.

Soon after that, while he was out hunting, Narcissus came upon a clear fountain, with water like silver, unknown to shepherds and beasts of the forest. He stooped down to drink and saw his own image in the water. Thinking the image was some beautiful water-spirit living in the fountain, he stood gazing with admiration at the bright eyes, the rounded cheeks, the ivory neck, the parted lips, and the glow of health and exercise over all. He fell in love with himself. When he brought his lips near to take a kiss and plunged his arms in to embrace the beloved object, it fled but returned again after a moment and renewed his fascination. Narcissus could not bear to turn away; he lost all thought of food or rest while he hovered over the brink of the fountain gazing longingly upon his own image. As his tears fell into the water, the image fled again and again, leaving him inconsolable. Since he could not tear himself away, by degrees he lost his color, his vigor, and the beauty that had once charmed the nymphs. Eventually he pined away and died. The nymphs mourned for him, especially the water nymphs. They prepared a funeral pyre and would have burned his body, but when

they went to get it, it was nowhere to be found. In its place grew a flower, purple within and surrounded with white leaves, which bears the name and preserves the memory of Narcissus.

In recent times, the term *narcissism*, taken from the myth of Narcissus, has become associated with an exaggerated focus on and absorption in the self. If each of us were honest, we would acknowledge moments when we become so tuned-in to our own interests, yearnings, needs, or cravings that we seem unaware of what is going on outside ourselves. Haven't there been times when you took that extra unnecessary glance in the mirror or got carried away talking on and on about a favorite topic without paying attention to others' reactions? Or you might have responded to someone's personal revelation with the reply, "Oh, that reminds me of a time when I . . ." instead of focusing on that person's feelings or needs in telling you the story. Perhaps, too, you can become so engrossed in private fantasies that you momentarily lose focus on the people and events around you, or maybe you have a habit of interrupting others in mid-sentence. Self-absorption is enormously common and easy to lapse into.

Beyond these occasional ordinary ways in which we are preoccupied with ourselves, however, are behavior patterns that so thoroughly dismiss the interpersonal dimension that they are toxic. People with a full narcissistic behavior pattern are so completely, even pathologically self-absorbed that they lack empathy, can be thin-skinned, and demonstrate very low levels of true awareness of themselves or others.

While it is amusing to consider the ancient story of a teenage boy falling hopelessly in love with his own reflection, it is far from amusing when you are forced to live, work, or associate with individuals who seem endlessly and obliviously self-absorbed. Whether in marriage, in the extended family, in social circles, in civic or church organizations, or at work, narcissists have a way of frustrating those trying to relate to them. While they often seem friendly or gregarious during the beginning phases of a relationship, time inevitably reveals that they are genuinely disinterested in most things

beyond their own agendas. As they maintain that self-focus, their desire to manipulate and control for their own purposes can elicit rage, hurt, disillusionment, confusion, false guilt, tension, intimidation, and insecurity in others around them.

A high percentage of the people who come to me for counseling reveal that their problems have been either instigated or greatly worsened by very selfish or manipulative people. Their lives have become intertwined with ones who are deceptive, phony, unwilling to change, controlling, and oblivious to their needs. They ask me, "How can I get this person to change?" Then I tell them, "There's very little you can do to persuade a true narcissist to change. By definition, narcissists have a very low ability to incorporate someone else's version of reality because they see themselves as the ultimate keepers of truth. They admit no wrong, or if they ever do admit wrong, it is only a matter of time before they convince themselves they were actually right." While my clients know that my response is probably correct, they nonetheless feel great angst about it.

Cindy, who admitted being worn out by her soon-to-be ex-husband, Martin, was one of those clients. Although she was only in her mid-forties, she looked older than her age, and she described that much of her adult life had been spent "on the end of a yo-yo string." She had once been a confident, eager young woman who seemed to be going somewhere in her life, but by the time she came to see me she said she felt herself to be just a shell of that person.

"When Martin and I began dating," she recalled, "I was fresh out of college and had a wonderful job in the mortgage business. I was making lots of good contacts in the real estate world, and despite my young age I was gaining the confidence of influential people. When Martin came along I could tell right away that he was a real charmer. I knew he had a history of dating several high-profile women, and something told me to steer clear of him. One of his best buddies pulled me aside and told me to believe only half the stories he told about his successes, and he even warned me not to get serious with him. Like a foolish schoolgirl, though, I fell for Martin's wit and charm, and before you knew it, I had an engagement

ring on my finger. He told me how much he adored me and how he would spend the rest of his life trying to make me happy. Those were words I really wanted to hear, and it never occurred to me to disbelieve him. He seemed so sincere.”

Heaving a big sigh, she continued. “It didn’t take long for me to realize that he was an incredibly selfish man. I had no illusions that marriage would be rosy, and I was prepared for a fair exchange of give and take; I knew we would have to negotiate differences along the way. Right from the start, though, I learned that he had already determined how life was supposed to play out, so instead of working with me to find harmony, he made it his self-appointed duty to get me onto his page. He was very critical, and I soon realized whenever we had to manage conflicts, my opinion was of zero consequence to him. He disregarded my feelings entirely, then he’d try to force me to see the light of his ways.”

“How would he do this?” I asked.

“Well, his tactics varied. Sometimes he would argue and argue until he finally wore me down. Other times he would punish me with silence, knowing that was torture to me because I like closure. Other times he would just secretly do what he wanted to do behind my back. Frequently he would lie or at least distort the truth.” Then Cindy paused before she went on. “I cannot recall one time when he told me I had a good point or that he was wrong. I felt consistently belittled by him, and over time I began to question my own sanity.” With another sigh, she said, “Living with that man was a nightmare.”

More often than not, the narcissists are not the ones who make their way into my counseling office. Though they usually have deep histories of anger and broken relationships, they rarely think they are the ones who need help. Sometimes they come in for a few sessions, but it is usually because they want to prove the other person wrong or to persuade me to validate their notions or their manipulation of the other person. Every now and then narcissists will make genuine efforts to change their ways, if they come to the point

where they no longer have the energy left to perpetuate their former lifestyle. Regrettably, these cases are the exception rather than the rule.

Instead, those in relationship with narcissists are usually the ones who want to learn about narcissism. Like Cindy, they have had to admit the futility of trying to force change that will not occur. They have come to realize that they have to maintain their own emotional healthiness, even if the narcissist remains in a toxic state. I encourage these people to become as thoroughly educated as they can about the pattern they are up against. Only by learning to evaluate their circumstances objectively can they begin to manage the subjective elements within them—and the narcissistic patterns of the person who is creating so many difficulties in their lives.

Common Narcissistic Traits

Narcissism is so powerful that it can be displayed in a broad variety of behaviors and personality types. In the coming chapters, we will examine ways to respond to its various manifestations and patterns, but first, let's acknowledge the eight primary ingredients common to a narcissistic pattern of behavior:

1. An inability to empathize; that is, an inability to experience another person's feelings and perceptions from that person's point of view
2. Manipulative or exploitive behavior
3. A sense of entitlement
4. An inability to receive direction
5. An insatiable need for control
6. A haughty or judgmental spirit
7. An unwillingness to acknowledge reality
8. An ability to create favorable public impressions

This list is not a flattering depiction of any person, yet these traits are highly predictable in narcissists. Those who must relate to narcissists, therefore, need to gain an objective understanding of these traits, so they can keep a handle on the emotions that the behavior arouses, especially because most narcissists are highly skilled at convincing those around them that they (not the narcissists) are defective. Under a narcissist's steady repetition of criticisms, others' confidence and resolve can erode. That's why it is so essential to understand narcissistic tendencies fully.

For the sake of clarity, let's examine the eight narcissistic traits one by one.

It's All About Me: Lack of Empathy

No two people can ever be expected to reason, feel, or prioritize in the same way. In a stroke of pure genius, our Creator chose to endow each person with his or her own uniqueness, right down to the very DNA that is the blueprint for each living organism. Healthy relationships, then, begin with the recognition (or perhaps it would be more poignant to call it the celebration) of the differences that are bound to surface in each interaction.

Each difference in a relationship represents an opportunity for the participants to grow and stretch. People who are not narcissistic recognize this basic truth. For instance, in an ordinary situation, if a non-narcissistic co-worker notices that you handled a project contrary to her preferences, she will not necessarily be upset. She will consider the possibility that the co-worker has a different and equally valid perspective, whereas a narcissist will dismiss another's preferences or feelings as irrelevant. A healthy response to such a situation would be, "I want to understand you better," whereas the narcissistic response would be, "You're wrong to think or feel that way."

When people differ, they can choose to be *empathetic*—to experience another's feelings and perceptions from that person's point of view. Empathy requires us to step outside of our own agendas long enough to develop an understanding of the other person's per-

spective. It can rightly be stated that no relationship will be whole without ongoing displays of empathy.

As I spoke with Cindy about her relationship with Martin, she told me, “Whenever we did not see eye to eye, which was often, it seemed that Martin made it his job to persuade me that my feelings were ridiculous and that he was the only one whose feelings mattered. Also, if I was just telling him about something that happened to me during the day, he would interrupt and begin talking about himself, as if my experiences meant nothing. Life was all about him. I don’t think it ever dawned on him that I was a normal person who needed to feel heard and understood.”

With a fiery look in her eyes, she said, “After many, many times of him dismissing my feelings, I once blurted out in sarcasm that it must be awful for him to live with someone whose feelings were always inappropriate. And do you know what he said back to me?” I didn’t reply because she was clearly on a roll. “He paused for a moment and then he said I was right . . . it really was terrible having to live with someone whose emotions were so consistently off base. Not once could he conceive that my feelings had merit. Not once!”

That’s the way narcissists think. Because they cannot muster an understanding or sympathetic reaction to others’ emotions or concerns, they generate great frustration as they rationalize that the world would be a much better place if others would just quit being so wrong in the ways they feel and react. They do not consider the pain they inflict on others, nor do they give any credence to others’ perceptions. They simply do not care about thoughts and feelings that conflict with their own.

I Want What I Want: Manipulative or Exploitive Behavior

Psychologically healthy people generally seek to be genuine, which involves a commitment to internal and external consistency. Simply put, *genuineness* means that someone’s behavior can be trusted as an accurate reflection of that person’s inner beliefs and priorities.

Narcissists are not genuine. The ways they publicly present themselves are not necessarily true representations of what they really feel or believe. They are more interested in posturing for favorable reactions than being known as authentic. Rather than understanding relationships as safe havens where openness and transparency can be practiced, they enter relationships looking for ways to coerce others to do their bidding. Narcissists replace fair and honest exchanges with behaviors that manipulate other people so that they can get their way.

One man, Jeff, described how he had learned to be cautious whenever he was in the presence of his sister, Lana. "I'm always watching my back whenever we have family get-togethers," he explained. "Lana can act as if she's your best pal, but I've learned that I can't let my guard down when she's friendly because history tells me that she's just setting me up for some manipulative purpose." For instance, as Jeff's extended family made preparations one year for a Thanksgiving Day gathering, Lana was most agreeable as she discussed her role in providing food. As Jeff put it, "Her cooperation seemed eerie because she has such a strong reputation for being argumentative or contrary regarding these sorts of things." Sure enough, as the Thanksgiving Day festivities wound down, Lana pulled her brother aside and said, "I need to ask a favor from you. My family has planned to go skiing over the Christmas break, and I'm going to need you to keep my dogs. Also, Grandma asked if she could stay with me for a couple of weeks, but since I'll be gone, I told her she could stay with you."

Right then Jeff understood why his sister had been cooperative with their Thanksgiving plans. She had two large, high-maintenance six-month-old puppies, and she did not want to pay to have them boarded. Jeff also knew that Lana often complained about attending to their Grandma's health needs, so Lana clearly did not want to have Grandma as a guest. Jeff realized that Lana had been buttering him up so he would agree to take on the chores she wanted him to do. She failed to consider that keeping the dogs would be difficult for him, given the fact that he and his wife had a newborn

son, and that his wife was allergic to animal hair. Lana only cared about her needs and preferences.

The manipulations of narcissists know no limits. Sometimes the exploitive behavior takes on the form of false friendliness, as in the case of Lana's dealings with Jeff. Other times, narcissists will resort to making others feel guilty. For instance, when Lana sensed that Jeff was less than enthusiastic about doing her bidding, she listed three or four favors she had done for him recently. She assumed that if she couldn't reason with him, guilt might be a successful hook. Some even lack a conscience to prevent them from lying or conveying only partial truths. Others manipulate through pouting, giving others the silent treatment, being secretive or stubborn, coniving behind others' backs, or being intimidating. Whatever the means, their behavior indicates that they place no value on open, straightforward communication; their only concern is that they get their way.

“You Owe Me”: A Sense of Entitlement

Underlying the manipulative behavior of narcissists is a belief that they are entitled to have others do whatever they want or need. “While I'm not concerned about your needs,” they might reason, “it is very important that you meet mine.” When others do not do their bidding or give them the treatment they think they deserve, narcissists can be highly offended. They may respond angrily, with threats, strong pleading, or irrational criticism.

Cindy described how Martin's spirit of entitlement affected their attempts to iron out disagreements during their marriage. “It was fairly common that we would disagree on a broad range of subjects,” she told me. “Naturally, Martin would explain his opinion, then I would tell him mine. Many times he would tell me that my opinions made no sense and that I should go along with his logic. I would counter that there are two sides to every argument and try to get him to see that we would have a better marriage if we could each consider what the other said and felt. He would often blurt

out, 'But I'm the husband.' Somehow he felt his position in the family meant I was supposed to cater to him, and he should never lower himself to serve or understand me." When Martin sensed that Cindy might not bow to his demands, he demeaned her with cursing and shouting, sometimes following her through the house as she tried to find relief. "He was a tyrant," she told me through tears, "and he would not let me rest until I agreed with him. I grew to hate him, and I actively looked for ways to avoid him."

"What have you done for me lately?" is a common theme for narcissists. Another one is "You owe me." They can have such a strong belief that they are especially unique that they can be genuinely shocked when others choose not to grant them favored status. For instance, after Lana asked her brother, Jeff, to keep her dogs and care for their ailing grandmother, she was caught off guard when Jeff told her it would not be practical to do so. Her response to him was, "How can you do this to me? Do you realize that you're going to ruin my ski trip?" She acted deeply offended and showed no concern for his feeling that his newborn child took precedence over her dogs; in fact, she seemed totally unaware of the unreasonableness of her request.

Healthy relationships make room for interdependence, where individuals understand that they need to consider each other's goals and perspectives as they live their lives together. We can achieve balance when we discard the entitlement mentality in favor of an attitude of fairness and inclusion. Narcissists, however, have difficulty reining in their need for entitlement, making it difficult for them to expect anything other than special treatment.

Nothing Goes In: Inability to Take Direction

There is no ongoing relationship in which the participants are so perfectly attuned to one another that there is no need for coaching and suggestions. In marriage, for instance, husbands and wives sometimes misread the other's thoughts or intentions, and, if they are mature, they agree to communicate their differences construc-

tively. Likewise, parents and children shift and adjust their responses to each other as they age and grow. In business and organizational relations, members have to keep each other informed about changing plans and procedures. Friendships and extended family interactions also require well-coordinated back and forth exchanges as everyone's separate needs become evident and must be accounted for. Relationships are never so static that they require no adjustments, nor are they ever so complete that they allow for no mistakes.

That reasonable picture of give and take in relationships, however, does not work for narcissists. They reason that cooperation leads to imposition, and they have great difficulty with conversations or interactions that challenge them to set aside their preferences. When faced with someone who indicates that change is in order or that mistakes need to be corrected, the narcissistic response is, "You don't really expect *me* to change, do you?" The need to be special is so central to narcissists that they repeatedly lie to themselves about their own importance, and they cannot accept the notion that others might not see them the same way. Self-preservation is the narcissist's highest priority, and if it requires them to dismiss any input that might seem uncomfortable or rejecting, so be it.

Cindy mentioned how she had tried many times to talk with Martin about making adjustments in managing their many differences and conflicts, yet he repeatedly rebuffed her. For instance, she told me that during their marriage she felt they had a habit of socializing only with his friends, and when opportunities arose to spend time with her friends he would opt out. As she pled with him to accept her friends, he would say something like, "I'm not doing anything wrong," or "Those people aren't my type." When Cindy argued that he needed to be more cordial and open-minded, he would retort with something like, "Why should I stand here and listen to your whining?" or "I'll not have you telling me who I should spend time with."

She went on to explain, "After several years with him, I began recalling one time after another when I would try to talk with him about being flexible or about hearing my thoughts. In every instance

he challenged me and spoke to me in a pushy tone of voice. It didn't matter what subject I talked about; his natural reaction was to treat me as if I didn't know what I was talking about. I swear, that man is the most stubborn person I've ever met. He can't learn anything new, and he can't make any changes because in his mind, he needs no change!"

Cindy finally left the marriage because Martin was so hard-hearted that no rational discussion or pleading would cause him to reconsider his behavior, even on the simplest of matters. Like most narcissists, defending his own turf was of higher priority than receiving input from his wife, even if it meant he had to defy logic in the process.

My Way or the Highway: Insatiable Need for Control

Any relationship requires order and organization. Accountability, structure, and predictability provide security and allow the participants in a healthy relationship to learn to rely on one another to contribute positively to their mutual goals and objectives. Order and organization mean that they also must recognize the need to exercise some control over their behaviors and impulses. Healthy people willingly acknowledge that it is best to have a general plan of action as they participate with others in life's pursuits.

Narcissists, too, agree that it can be good to have controls within relationships, but they assume that they (and no one else) should be the ones holding the reins of power. For narcissists, it's not good for others to be in control because their desires might not be fulfilled under others' leadership. That's why narcissists unilaterally appoint themselves as the final authority. They dislike the idea of being submissive, but they relish the thought of others submitting to them.

One man, James, told me of a failed business venture that had been doomed due to the lack of cooperation from his partner, Philip. "I had the money," James told me, "and Philip had the contacts. We had a specialty product that could be easily marketed to

manufacturers of circuit boards. From the very beginning of our efforts, though, when Philip and I met to discuss each week's marketing strategies, it became clear that there would be one way and only one way for us to proceed—and that was Philip's way. I would talk with him about my ideas, and we would seemingly have an agreement, but Philip would later conduct business as if our conversation had never occurred. When I talked with him about staying coordinated with our plan, he would just argue. It didn't take long for me to realize that he was a totally self-centered man who had used me in order to get my financial resources. Nothing I said mattered to him because he had such a need to be in control that he could justify any of his decisions. He'd go behind my back with office staff and customers, giving directives that were inconsistent with our agreements. He was bossy and critical, and no one's opinion mattered except his own."

Narcissists display their need for control through various means. Some use obvious behavior like being forceful, strident, bossy, bullying, stubborn, or argumentative. Others may use more covert behavior such as punishing withdrawal, feigning agreement, slandering others, withholding cooperation, or using seductive charm. Whatever the tactic, they are determined not to let someone else establish the rules of engagement. So convinced are they of the superiority of their ways that they cannot and will not play second fiddle. They continually look for ways to force themselves upon others.

You're So Wrong: A Haughty or Judgmental Spirit

What makes an orchestra sound so appealing? Various instruments harmonize their distinctive sounds. A violin is distinct from a trumpet. An oboe sounds nothing like the bass drums. A piccolo is very dissimilar from a cello. A clarinet bears no resemblance to a trombone. The goal of an orchestra is not to get all the instruments to make the same sounds; rather, the aim is to blend the instruments' sounds to create a pleasing whole. Suppose the first violin speaks up and says, "What is wrong with that bassoon over there?"

It's the oddest-looking object you ever saw and makes the strangest sound. Get it out of here. And what about the viola? Is that thing trying to sound like me? I certainly hope not. . . . Shoot it! And whose idea was it to let that stupid flute in here? I hate flutes! They're too perky, and they add absolutely nothing to what I'm trying to do."

This absurd analogy provides an accurate image of the judgmental way that narcissists think. In every venue they encounter people who look, reason, and set priorities differently. While common sense tells us that it is quite possible to find harmony in the midst of such differences, that's not what narcissists think.

Psychologically healthy people understand that every person is a unique blend of skills, accomplishments, and inclinations, and we are all worthy in our own right. They dismiss judgments and claims of superiority and instead openly applaud the equal value of each person. Narcissists, however, find that no one is as good (or smart or successful or skilled) as they are, and they are quick to let others know how they fall short.

As Jeff described to me how he had struggled for years to get along with his sister, Lana, he said, "From our childhood years until now, Lana has shown a relentless tendency to judge me. If she comes to my house, it takes no time at all for her to point out what's wrong with my kids, and she traces their quirks to my poor parenting skills. She doesn't like the pictures hanging on my walls. She thinks I have poor taste in music. She thinks I'm an idiot because I like to referee Little League baseball games. There is hardly anything in my life that avoids her scrutiny!"

Lana's narcissistic thinking causes her to interpret differences in comparative or competitive terms rather than appreciate them. Her approach toward life does not allow her to see her brother's distinctive traits as merely indicators of separate yet equal qualities. Her vanity causes her to denigrate Jeff for the things that make him uniquely Jeff. Her need to punish and criticize him whenever she finds him lacking reveals the depth of her judgmental thinking and her assumption that he should defer to her.

This tendency to judge differences harshly is perhaps most painful when another expresses emotions openly. For example, if a person says they feel hurt, the narcissist might reply, “Well, that’s just stupid.” In response to a valid expression of anger, the reply might be, “I can’t believe you think that way; you’re wrong.” Rather than receiving personal disclosures at face value, narcissists tend to measure them against a standard of right and wrong that they have established. If you don’t agree with their assessment, you’re liable to receive a condescending response.

The Truth According to Me: Unwillingness to Acknowledge Reality

In a sense, narcissists are out of touch with reality. They are not mentally ill, like a psychotic; they are just unwilling to acknowledge truth that does not match their preferences. While normal people can weigh events rationally and draw fair conclusions about themselves and others, narcissists do not. They lack the objectivity to live with reasonable insight, because their need for self-exaltation does not allow them to accept that their perceptions might not be ultimate truth. Their idealized view of themselves blinds them as they try to make sense of life, particularly the elements in themselves that might be imperfect or that might require adjustments (and they never want to make adjustments).

On many occasions in her marriage to Martin, Cindy had attempted to talk with him about his lightning quick temper. Instead of considering her input, Martin would often say something like, “If you put me up against any other man, you’ll find that I have far more balanced emotions than any of them.” Cindy would try to explain that she was not wanting to talk about the anger of other men, just his. But she got nowhere in her discussions because he would inevitably talk about himself in such lofty, comparative terms that he failed to acknowledge that he truly had an anger problem.

No one is without faults. That is not a truth that should create undue stress or shame; it is simply an unavoidable fact. If we can

admit our faults with humility, good things can happen. If we make excuses for our flaws and think we're perfect, we not only miss the growth potential in life's lessons, we also fail to accept facts at face value. We are lying to ourselves and living without insight about our real character. Jesus Christ himself spoke the well-known phrase, "You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free." As narcissists ignore truth and invent their own alternative realities, they are not free but imprisoned by their own falsehoods. Over time, it becomes a prison they cannot escape.

Lethal Charm: Ability to Create Favorable Impressions

This eighth ingredient of narcissism might seem odd. How can such thoroughly disagreeable, difficult people be charming? Despite the destructive nature of this personality profile, many narcissists have a history of appearing friendly and agreeable—at first. Only after people have ongoing exposure to the private world of a narcissist do they experience the pain such a person can cause. Narcissists seem to know that if they display their selfishness too quickly, they will be shunned, so they keep it under wraps until they have gained a foothold in another's life. But it catches up with them. As narcissists age, they leave behind an ever-expanding list of relationships that ended in utter disillusionment and futility. Despite their general disinterest in others' feelings, narcissists yearn to be admired; they need to win others' approval, even as they posture to keep a manipulative edge. They become masters at feigning interest, when in fact they are not interested at all. They can cover contempt for someone with seemingly genuine friendliness. So skilled are they at appearing likeable that even close associates can be fooled into assuming that all is well in the relationship even when it is not.

James, the man who joined forces with Philip in the failed business venture, explained how foolish he felt because he had originally been convinced that they would have an ideal partnership. "I had known Philip casually for several years prior to going into business with him," he said, "and he always seemed like a nice guy. We

even played golf together a couple of times, and I really enjoyed his company. It was only after we began working together that I recognized how much of a conniver he was. With his friendliness and seemingly believable promises, I had been led to assume that he would be a real joy to work with.” Then, shaking his head, he added, “Boy, do I feel duped.”

Likewise, Cindy reminisced about her dating days with Martin and drew a similar conclusion. “As we dated, I could tell that he was not the open-minded person that I might have wished for. I mean, he was pretty opinionated and liked being in charge, and I suppose that should have raised some red flags, but at the same time I didn’t worry about it. He was also very attentive, and he acted like a gentleman, and eventually that won me over.” Running her hands through her hair, she mused, “If I only knew then what I know now.”

Part of the narcissistic hidden strategy is to protect the self’s interests even if it means being phony. Like a wolf seeking sheep to prey upon, they can cloak themselves in ways that draw others into a trusting response, only to reveal the extent of their self-absorption at a later time.

Your Response: Delicate Detachment

When faced with the ongoing challenge of life with a narcissist, people commonly experience a broad spectrum of emotions. Narcissism represents personal immaturity at its worst, so it is only natural for you to feel great tension as you try to determine how to respond to the manipulative behaviors that are sure to come your way. When I counsel with individuals such as Cindy, James, or Jeff, I begin with the assumption that they will only aggravate their distress if they attempt to change the narcissist. In most cases, it won’t happen. Narcissists have such poor insight into their maladaptive behaviors that any efforts to get them to see the light will likely turn into arguments that go nowhere. Simply put, trying to persuade a narcissist to become non-narcissistic is an exercise in futility.

Cindy had tears in her eyes as she sat in my office reflecting on her past experiences with Martin. “That man absolutely did not know me, nor did he care to learn about my needs and feelings. I felt on guard constantly because I never knew what kind of stunt he would pull next. It seemed like our house was a courtroom, and he was the prosecuting attorney who was persistently accusing me of breaking his laws. Whenever we had conflict, we could never just talk it out like two levelheaded adults. Instead, there was blame, stubbornness, and irritability.”

“How would you typically react to your conflicts with Martin?” I asked.

“I’d usually start out trying to be rational, but he had such a knack for twisting everything I said that I’d quickly become agitated and defensive. That man knew how to push my buttons, and despite my promises to myself to stay calm, I’d eventually be hooked, and the results were not pretty.”

Cindy’s sense of futility represents the norm for those in relationships with narcissists. Most people enter relationships hopeful and optimistic, anticipating a certain degree of respect and understanding. That optimism can quickly fade, though, as the narcissist repeatedly refuses to engage in ways that promote camaraderie.

When you are dealing with a narcissist, your task is to maintain enough emotional separation so you can stay proactive, as opposed to reactive, in your efforts to be an emotionally stable person. While you might wish that it were otherwise, you will need to proceed with the realization that you can maintain emotional integrity without the narcissist’s cooperation. The narcissist does not have to set your pace.

People who find themselves in regular contact with a narcissist typically struggle with two common emotions: fear and anger. The fear might take the form of insecurity or anxiety, but it is most commonly displayed as defensiveness. The anger can show itself through rage or aggression, but it most likely is manifested in an ongoing battle with frustration, impatience, and a sense of futility.

To keep these emotions from ruling you, you will need to learn *delicate detachment*. By suggesting that you detach, I mean that it is wisest to remember that the narcissist is not the keeper of ultimate truth. You can choose to chart your own course of life even if it goes against the narcissist's preferences (and it inevitably will). You will need to separate yourself from the narcissist's agenda and be firm and resolute as you set your own course for each day. You cannot afford to depend on the narcissist to establish your life's direction.

By *delicate detachment*, I mean that your resolve to be separate need not be accompanied by a spirit of haughtiness or combativeness. The narcissist is likely to feel offended when you choose not to comply, yet that is not your problem to solve. If you can maintain a calm, deliberate manner, free of defensiveness, you can make the choices that are best for you, knowing that you are not obligated to debate those choices with the narcissist in your life.

In the following chapters, we will explore in greater detail how you can learn to detach and monitor your responses to narcissism. It will be crucial that you develop an appropriate plan of action, since the lack of planning could result in you becoming just as self-absorbed as your narcissistic antagonist. That is a possibility we would like to avert completely.

As we explore your responses to narcissism, we will continue gaining insight into the behaviors associated with this personality type, and we will examine the causes for people developing such a manner of life. In Chapter Two we will begin delving into the origins of the narcissistic pattern.

