



STYLIST

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All the ways having a narcissistic partner can negatively impact your body

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Many of us are all too aware of the devastating impact stress can have on our bodies. Living with a narcissistic partner is a hugely stressful experience, but despite this, there's been no official research on the specific effects of narcissistic abuse on victims' physical health. Here, psychotherapist Kathleen Saxton explains the very real ramifications manipulation and emotional abuse can have on everything from the immune system to blood pressure.

Many of us have struggled to deal with a person we might describe as a narcissist: someone manipulative, egotistical and self-absorbed who privately believes the world revolves around them. But interacting with a true narcissist – ie someone with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) – is difficult and destabilising on a different level.

Driven by inner emptiness and a fundamental lack of self-worth, a real narcissist has a constant need for admiration and lacks empathy for others. At worst, their behaviour can tip into narcissistic abuse, a form of emotional abuse designed to undermine the victim's sense of self-worth, security and even reality.

As a psychotherapist who specialises in narcissism, I have seen how narcissistic abuse can take many forms. These include controlling behaviour, abandoning and sadistic neglect (where the narcissist derives enjoyment from hurting their victim). I remember one client whose narcissistic fiancé suddenly abandoned them on the morning of a hospital operation, smirking as they left. Another was publicly ridiculed by their partner, in front of their family, when their business failed.

Unsurprisingly, narcissistic abuse can leave victims in severe psychological distress. But the damage doesn't stop at the psyche. Increasingly, studies have started to illuminate how chronic stress – including the kind experienced by victims of sustained narcissistic abuse – can have a profound impact on victims' physical health too. So how can survivors of narcissistic abuse start their journey towards healing?

The reality of narcissistic abuse

Narcissistic abuse almost always takes place behind closed doors, and for victims, it can feel utterly bewildering. Dr Ramani Durvasula, a licensed clinical psychologist and leading expert on narcissistic abuse, describes it as a "slow erosion of the soul". Last year, I interviewed a woman – let's call her Annie* – for my forthcoming book about narcissism. Annie had been married to a suspected narcissist for 10 years, a disorienting decade during which he neglected, ridiculed, stonewalled and controlled her, all while undermining her to his family and their children.

One of Annie's relatives told me that she had previously been a vibrant, warm, sane, energetic and loving professional and a wife and mother with no history of mental or physical ailments. But during the course of her marriage, this relative watched Annie transform into someone who was depressed, anxious and chronically unwell.

Annie desperately checked herself into hospitals and clinics as her physical health deteriorated. She spent thousands on doctors who tried to diagnose her various physical ailments, including a swallowing issue, gastrointestinal troubles and painful inflammation in her legs and across her body.

“Narcissistic abuse is a slow erosion of the soul”

Her husband barely seemed to notice her absence, apart from being irritated that he now “needed” to hire help so that Annie's hospital stays didn't impact his work or lifestyle. In a classic narcissist move, he then positioned himself as both the victim and the hero of the story, telling friends that Annie was “attention seeking” while he was having to bring the children up “alone”.

This was objectively untrue. In reality, Annie's health had collapsed as a result of sustained narcissistic abuse, including her husband's emotional withdrawal, cruelty and ridicule. She no longer felt safe or seen at home, and her anxiety was causing a number of somatic illnesses. It was clear to the many psychologists who worked with the family that Annie's husband was controlling the narrative – and had a total disregard for his wife.⁹

How narcissistic abuse affects the body

Why does emotional abuse, including narcissistic abuse, have such an impact on the body? It's likely that stress is the answer. Emotional abuse often leads to chronic psychological stress, which is known to cause long-term damage to physical health.

One meta-analysis of more than 300 studies concluded that chronic stress can have a negative effect on the immune system. Stress is also associated with chronic inflammation, which can contribute to health problems including heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Other research has identified a link between psychological stress or trauma and problems such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and chronic fatigue syndrome.

Living with constant fear and anxiety – as many narcissistic abuse victims do – can dysregulate the system in charge of the body's stress response (the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis). The result is chronically elevated levels of cortisol, also known as the stress hormone. This, in turn, can suppress the immune system, increase blood pressure and contribute to the development of various chronic conditions. In Annie's case, her doctor was clear that her ailments and symptoms were associated with stress.

Research on the specific effects of narcissistic abuse on physical health is yet to be undertaken. But it's clear to those who work in this field that victims of narcissistic abuse experience significant physical effects due to the stress and trauma they have experienced. We see it in our clinics every single day.

Finding freedom – in body and mind

For many victims, escaping the cycle of narcissistic abuse by ending the relationship and finally breaking the trauma bond is the first step towards healing. I've heard people compare leaving a narcissist to giving up heroin; like any addiction, it often takes multiple attempts to break free. Survivors may find that their physical symptoms of trauma subside in the first year after they leave, but it can take a second year to fully reregulate the nervous system.

“People compare leaving a narcissist to giving up heroin”

Annie experienced ongoing physical ailments for some time in the wake of the narcissistic abuse she experienced, but she's now thriving and settled with a new partner. However, she is still processing everything she's been through in therapy, highlighting how the effects of emotional abuse can require ongoing treatment. Seeing a therapist experienced in narcissistic abuse can help alleviate both psychological and physical symptoms, particularly through specialist narcissistic recovery work, trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR).

Support systems, both personal and professional, also play a vital role in helping someone recover from narcissistic abuse. We can all help provide survivors with the emotional validation and care they need to navigate their healing process.

When it comes to narcissistic abuse, I often say that it has to be believed to be seen. A true narcissist can charm and hoodwink the most intelligent and emotionally astute individual, making them feel like they're on cloud nine in the early days of the relationship. But if you stay, that brief high can cost you many years of your life – and your health.

*Name has been changed for anonymity

