



STYLIST

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“It felt like psychological warfare”: what it’s really like to divorce a narcissist, according to a psychotherapist

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Divorce can be an upsetting, highly emotional time in any circumstance, but when a narcissistic partner is involved, a separation can reach a whole new level of discord. For true narcissists, divorce is the ultimate betrayal, and they use a variety of bitter tactics to try to regain control of the situation. Here, the psychotherapist Kathleen Saxton, who specialises in narcissism, explains how to handle these toxic splits and survive a divorce from a narcissist.

Many of us may have casually labelled someone a ‘narcissist’ when they’ve behaved in a self-centred, egotistical way with little concern for others. But dealing with a true narcissist – or someone who has narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) – can be completely debilitating and draining, especially when a romantic relationship with a narcissist begins to break down.

Fuelled by an excessive need for admiration and a lack of genuine empathy, true narcissists struggle to make authentic emotional connections, often manipulating relationships for their own gain. Narcissists may be openly arrogant, dominating conversations, dismissing criticism and believing they are inherently superior, or they may be shy and self-pitying, using passive aggression, guilt or victimhood to manipulate others, but one thing they all share is fragile self-esteem, making them highly reactive to perceived slights.

Unlike everyday narcissistic traits, NPD is rigid and resistant to change, and divorce can be a key psychological trigger for their problematic behaviours. As a psychotherapist who specialises in narcissism, I’ve seen a significant rise in clients who are navigating a divorce from a narcissist. In my clinical experience, this is partly due to a greater awareness of narcissistic abuse, which appears to be encouraging people to leave toxic relationships, but the reality of doing so can be far from easy.

The reality of divorcing a narcissist

For many months, I worked with a woman called Laura*, helping her navigate her divorce from her suspected narcissistic husband of nine years. For years, her marriage gradually unravelled as her outwardly charismatic husband, Dan*, behaved in a dramatically different way in private. He constantly criticised Laura, dismissing and demeaning her and emotionally abandoning her to the point she felt neglected, alone and inferior.

In truth, Laura was a supportive wife and attentive mother who was committed to the relationship, but unknown to her, Dan had a litany of ex-partners who had all experienced his insufferable behaviour. During their marriage, Laura had to deal with Dan’s extreme personal preening, fantastical ideas of professional grandeur and his sneering at her attempts to build a career, slighting her whenever she demonstrated signs of strength.

“Narcissists see divorce as the ultimate rejection”

Laura had been coming to therapy for six months after a particularly spiteful episode, after which Dan refused to speak to her for six whole days when she questioned why he had openly ridiculed and then ignored her during a work dinner with his bosses. He had gone on to openly belittle her in front of their children when she desperately begged him to acknowledge her as they ate supper in silence. Dan’s reported behaviour displayed clear clinical signs to me that Laura was dealing with NPD – from the calculated cruelty he deployed to the complete lack of accountability, refusal to apologise and his constant need for praise and attention, even from their young children.

Repeated manipulative incidents like this caused a slow erosion of her confidence in the relationship and left her feeling worthless, invisible and lost. In her first session with me, she admitted: “Something has finally broken within me; I can’t take it anymore.” She eventually mustered the strength to leave Dan, and while she expected difficulties, nothing prepared her for what followed.

During one session, Laura sat in my office, hands clenched in her lap, her voice betraying her exhaustion and her eyes full of angry tears. The previous night, her seven-year-old son had refused to return to Laura after a weekend with his father, saying he was “scared of her” and no longer wanted to live at home. “I thought the hardest part would be finding the courage to tell him I wanted a divorce. I had no idea he’d go and do this,” she said. Laura’s pain was excruciating and palpable. She knew, as well as I did, that she was a loving and gentle parent, but she was now wrestling with the new reality of divorcing a narcissist.

“Each step felt like a psychological warfare game”

The unique process of divorcing a narcissist

Unlike typical divorces, where both parties may experience pain but ultimately want to work towards closure, narcissists are driven by a need to win. They see divorce not as an end to marriage, but as the ultimate rejection and an attack on their identity. Dr Ramani Durvasula, a licensed clinical psychologist and a leading expert on narcissistic abuse, says that narcissists react to rejection with rage, revenge and relentless attempts to regain control.

Even if they were unfaithful or abusive, a narcissistic partner will believe they are entitled to maintain control over their ex-spouse. Many are emotionally and financially threatening throughout the divorce proceedings. Some use delay tactics such as refusing to sign papers or initiating frivolous lawsuits to keep their former partner entangled in the legal process.

One of the most distressing tactics narcissists deploy is something called parental alienation – turning their children against the other parent through lies and manipulation to maintain control via the children. A behaviour extensively researched by child psychiatrist William Bernet, narcissistic parents can psychologically manipulate children into rejecting the other parent, which they do not out of genuine concern for the child’s welfare, but as a means of preserving their fragile self-image and reinforcing their sense of power.

Psychotherapists Karen and Nick Woodall, who lead the pioneering Family Separation Clinic, are at the frontline of parental alienation, working with children of high-conflict divorces. Their work shows how narcissists often use legal proceedings to wear down an ex-partner, using children as leverage. The narcissist may even launch a case trying to gain sole custody of their children, ignoring that they themselves may have barely raised them until that point.

“Escaping a narcissist can be hellish”

Narcissists also frequently ignite smear campaigns against their former partners, portraying them as crazy, hypochondriacs, unfaithful or even abusive. They enlist and blindside mutual friends, family and even legal professionals to further isolate their ex-spouse and leave them questioning their own reality. Narcissists can often refuse to pay child support or spousal maintenance, even if court-ordered. They can hide assets, sabotage careers and create financial chaos, forcing their ex into a position of vulnerability.

In Laura’s case, she said Dan refused to acknowledge any responsibility for the breakup of their marriage and set out on a series of relentless and unnecessary court battles in which he assassinated her character and used their children as pawns. For Laura, each step in the divorce felt like an endless game of psychological warfare, with her ex refusing to ‘lose’. By the time her divorce was finalised, Laura said her children were showing signs of deep distress and her son was barely speaking to her. She had lost close friends, spent thousands on legal fees and had questioned her own reality countless times.

How to survive divorcing a narcissist

Anyone struggling with divorcing a narcissistic partner should focus on finding a lawyer and a therapist who understands narcissistic abuse. Not all family lawyers or therapists are familiar with the tactics narcissists use, so it’s crucial to find professionals who have experience dealing with high-conflict personalities.

Keeping meticulous records of emails, texts, financial transactions and any interactions that could serve as evidence in court is essential. Narcissists thrive on twisting narratives, so having a clear paper trail that sets out the truth of the situation is crucial. Courts and judges can also be wary of accusations of narcissism, given the current colloquial ease of its use and the ongoing misunderstanding between narcissistic traits that we all might carry to some extent and true NPD. Most importantly, the family courts are rightly focused on giving ‘paramount consideration’ to the children involved in a divorce, so a parent’s prognosis of what is wrong with their spouse is of little interest to the court. Allowing lawyers to find elegant ways to describe what is happening without using the word ‘narcissism’ is helpful.

Communicating as little as possible with a former narcissistic partner can also minimise emotional reactions. Keep interactions factual and try not to engage in any drama they might instigate – holding your nerve and staying above the chaos will pay dividends in the end. If you have children, protect them as much as possible by shielding them from the ongoing drama. While you can gently point out potential manipulation, focus your energy on encouraging open conversations, validating their feelings and seeking professional support to help them navigate the confusion.

Two years after her divorce was finalised, Laura sat in my office again – this time, her hands relaxed and her voice steady. “I won’t pretend it was easy; there were points I didn’t think I would mentally make it,” she admitted. “But I’m free. The children are doing OK, and I can breathe again.” She had rebuilt her life, regained equal care of her children, and was thriving in a career her ex once told her she’d never succeed in. Escaping a narcissist can be hellish, but there is life on the other side.

*Names have been changed

