

Surviving Emotionally While Divorcing A Narcissist

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UPDATED 05/13/19



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Narcissistic behavior is one of the character traps Dr. Mark Banschick explains in his article on Malignant Divorce. According to Dr. Banschick, "the narcissist is completely self-serving and selfish." So, how do you get through a divorce unscathed if your spouse is narcissistic?

In some situations, a divorcing couple is made up of one narcissist and one reasonable person, the narcissistic spouse can single-handedly create enormous conflict. The narcissist's negative actions and response to the divorce cause the reasonable spouse to go into defensive mode, especially if there are children involved.

To those who don't know better, it looks like the reasonable spouse is fully engaged in creating conflict. But what is really happening is that the reasonable spouse is trying to protect themselves and their children from the narcissist who is using the legal system to bully them. Many do not recognize the characteristics of a narcissist, even during the marriage but, introduce divorce into the narcissist's life and it can become quite evident that this person has a personality disorder. One that keeps them from being able to play fair when they feel backed into a corner.

That is why so few people find themselves emotionally equipped to survive while divorcing a narcissist. The reasonable spouse goes into the divorce process expecting the same level of consideration that they experienced during the marriage to only be met by an adversary who will stop at nothing to "win" what they perceive as a war being waged against them.

It's difficult to stay emotionally level-headed when what you thought would be a simple process turns into all-out war and all you care about is at stake. The only way to survive while divorcing a narcissist is having the ability to quickly recognize who you are dealing with and the willingness to do battle, roll up your sleeves and go to war.

First Consider the Characteristics of a Narcissist:

- Has a need for admiration
- A need to be right
- A need to be seen as the good guy
- A need to criticize when you don't meet their need
- Is charismatic and successful
- Lacks the ability to feel remorse
- Has no conscience
- Has a tremendous need to control you and the situation

- Has values that are situational; if you believe infidelity is wrong, so do they, even if they don't, their need to impress you motivates them to hold the same beliefs
- Uses a facade of caring and understanding to manipulate
- Is emotionally unavailable
- Nothing is ever their fault
- Hangs onto resentment
- Has a grandiose sense of self
- Feels misunderstood
- Is not interested in solving marital problems, it is their way or the highway
- Is envious of other's success

When divorcing a narcissist, Dr. Banschick says, "he completely dismisses any of your needs or all the years of devotion and mutual companionship that you had built together. Normal people remember the good from the past. It informs a sense of balance and fairness during a divorce (even through a betrayal). You may be getting a divorce, but that doesn't mean that you don't have valuable memories and a life story together. For the narcissist, it is all gone; like it never happened. You will have to understand this if you are to deal effectively with him.

The narcissist can undermine you with your friends, with your children and steal your money, all while looking sincere and generating goodwill among the community."

How To Protect Yourself When Divorcing The Narcissist

A narcissist finds it hard to accept that his/her influence in your life is over. Whether they file for the divorce or you, the narcissist will attempt to remain in control of his influence over your life. If you have children with this person they will work over-time at attempting to control how child support is spent, how child visitation is handled and every other aspect of the co-parenting relationship.

How much emotional abuse, financial and sometimes domestic abuse the narcissist is able to inflict depends on how you respond to him/her. If you show the narcissist any sympathy, fear, weakness or confusion the narcissist will feed off of it and continue his/her cycle of abusive behavior.

Protecting yourself means showing no weakness, not buying into anything the narcissist says, researching as much as you can find about narcissism and having an attorney on your side who is willing to pull out all the stops when it comes to protecting your legal rights.

Here are four tactics to help you deal with divorce.

1. Examine Your Role in the Ongoing Conflict

The healthier you are emotionally the more success you will have in dealing with the narcissist. You are giving into the narcissist's attempt to manipulate every time you respond to him/her.

A narcissist is adept at causing confusion. When in an adversarial relationship such as divorce you begin to question whether the problem is with you or the narcissist. That is exactly where the narcissist wants you; confused and questioning yourself.

People often ask me what they can do to change how someone responds to them. If you are attempting to do something that will make a difference in the way he/she behaves STOP. You cannot change the behaviors of others but you can change the way you respond to their behavior.

Your response to a narcissist should be measured. You should be aware that they are trying to push your buttons and want a negative response from you. The best advice I can give is to realize that the things the narcissist does or says is not about you, it is about them. The narcissist is attempting to make themselves feel better by making you feel shame, fear or guilt.

The narcissist will project his own fears, shame, and guilt off onto you by using the Family Court System to abuse. Not retaliating or challenging them puts the shame, fear, and guilt back onto them.

2. Deal With the Reality of the Situation

The world of the narcissist is made up of fantasy, nothing is real, all is an expression of their need to be someone they are not. It is imperative you see the narcissist for who he/she really is and not for whom you wish he/she was.

Regardless of how good you want the narcissist to be, the more you work at bringing goodness out, the more the narcissist will exploit your goodness.

The narcissist wants you to doubt your own value. The best defense during divorce against such a person is to appreciate your own self-worth and refuse to buy into their need to dismiss and belittle you and your needs.

3. Be Willing to Set Firm Boundaries

The narcissist believes their needs are more important than yours, they believe they are more intelligent than you and find it unacceptable that anyone would disagree with them. For this reason, they lack an understanding of boundaries and respecting the needs of others.

You can't teach or expect the narcissist to ever respect your boundaries. You can, however, refuse to allow the narcissist to cross your boundaries and cause you undue stress during the divorce process. This is done by you controlling what behaviors you will and will not allow.

Don't make the mistake of believing that trying to control the behaviors of the narcissist is the answer to setting boundaries with him/her. Most believe that protecting themselves and setting boundaries means confronting and being assertive. This does not work with the narcissist. The more you confront and assert your position the more you play into their game.

When setting boundaries with the narcissist you need to refuse to communicate unless it can be done in a manner free of conflict, manipulation, and disrespect. You may need to insist that all communication is via email. You can let it be known that you will not respond to any communication that dismisses or belittles you and your needs.

You can expect the narcissist to push back against the boundaries you set. If you want to stop the cycle of abuse and disrespect you must be firm, stand your ground and refuse to allow him/her to push your buttons. Remember, you are trying to separate yourself from the narcissist. As I said, this is a threat to him/her so be on guard for efforts on their part to draw you back into the toxicity of the relationship.

4. Surround Yourself With an Understanding Support System

During the divorce, we all go to family and friends for support and advice. Your situation is unique, though; friends and family will not understand and may even doubt your honesty when you relay what you are dealing with.

It is essential that you hire a divorce attorney who has an understanding of narcissistic personality disorder and how to deal with it during the legal process of divorce. Also, find a therapist who can help you work through the feelings you will have during the divorce and after. A therapist can help you set boundaries and stick with them, a therapist can help you identify your role in the conflict and can help you understand what is and isn't "real." The people you choose to go to for help will play a huge role in how well you navigate divorce from a narcissist.