

# How to Handle Narcissists and Gaslighters

**T**he husband looked and acted as normal as anyone. He had a genuine smile and a charming personality, the perfect image of a supportive and loving spouse. But behind closed doors, he was corrosive.

In his divorce proceedings, he'd weaponize his own kids with comments like "Your mom cares more about money than she does about you" or "Your mom doesn't want you, that's why she wants to leave us."

He would berate his wife only to turn right around and act like the victim when confronted, claiming, "You pushed me to do this. You made me do this." The psychological warfare was nonstop. One minute he'd call to harass her and hang up. Another minute he'd call to leave a voicemail, mimicking heartfelt concern like, "I really hope we can co-parent peacefully for the kids' sake." As though he hadn't been heartless minutes before.

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He lied to their mutual friends and relatives, painting his soon-to-be ex-wife as unstable and greedy, while pretending he was the only person trying to hold the family together.

Toxic communication isn't heavy blows from boxing gloves under bright lights. It's a back-alley knife fight in the dark.

As the divorce continued, the husband used every detail as an excuse to cause hurt. He'd agree to terms one day only to back out the next, accusing his wife of "trying to take everything." Nothing moved in the negotiations unless it was his idea and his alone. Finally, the court reviewed months of bank statements, financial records, affidavits, and all the audio recordings of the husband's phone calls. The evidence painted a picture of a man obsessed with control and manipulation at any cost.

For the first time, he was exposed for who he really was: a narcissist.

His story unraveled, and his tactics backfired as the judge ruled in favor of the wife. There was no grand moment of self-awareness or apology from the husband. Instead, he blamed everyone else. The court was biased. His attorney was unethical. He even blamed the courthouse staff. He clung to his narrative to the end. That's all he knew how to do. He could see the hurt he'd caused, but he was incapable of caring about it. Sadly, that's how back-alley fights with narcissists often end. There's no moment of redemption—just a return to peace after a lot of pain.

I know this story because the wife's attorney is my

friend. I've never forgotten it. It's a searing example of the subtlety, toxicity, and manipulation of a narcissist.

To fight back against a narcissist, you must refuse to let them pull you into their darkness while you find your way back to the light. But there's a major problem in that fight, and it could be why you're still struggling with a narcissist.

The game is rigged.

## **The Game You Never Signed Up For**

The difficulty of communicating with a narcissist is that they look like they'd be so normal. That if you could only explain it to them, make them understand why what they said hurt you or what they did was wrong, then they'd apologize and it would all be okay. That you could connect with them heart-to-heart, like turning a key in a lock.

In reality, interacting with a narcissist is more like playing a carnival game. It looks straightforward, even enticingly beatable. But it's not.

It's rigged.

Whenever you encounter someone with a narcissistic personality, I want you to remember that you're playing *their* carnival game. Unless you know how the game is rigged, you will come away with less than you had before. Less peace. Less patience. Less faith in humanity.

How can you know you're falling into their trap? Here are some clues:

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- **Rewritten history:** The conversation consistently shifts back to them. They rewrite past events to make themselves look better or justify their actions.
- **One winner:** They elevate their own actions or accomplishments, making them seem superior to anyone else's. Their achievements are always framed as the best. They downplay or dismiss others' successes.
- **Never enough:** No matter how much praise or attention you give, it never satisfies them. They continue to crave more, leaving you feeling like you're always falling short.
- **Emotional dismissal:** They dismiss your feelings as unimportant, or they downplay your emotions, making it clear that only their feelings truly matter.
- **Conditional apologies:** On the rare occasion they apologize, it's usually followed by a justification that absolves them of any real accountability. The apology may feel hollow or deflective, as though they're the victim.

Notice the similarity in each sign? Narcissists suffer from main character syndrome. No one else matters as much as they matter to themselves. The word *narcissist* comes from the classic Greek myth of Narcissus, a young man who fell

in love with his own reflection. Their world revolves around one person.

Consequently, the goal of a narcissist is to praise or provoke. If you're not feeding their ego by giving them praise, they will start an argument to upset you. Why? Because narcissists delight in your frustration as much as they delight in your praise. They strive to influence and control your emotions—regardless of which emotion.

So no matter how well you explain yourself or how empathic of an approach you take, the narcissist will twist it back onto you for another round of “You never . . .” or “You always . . .” They may be saying *you* a lot, but it's always about them. When you hear that, imagine a carnival barker saying, “You right there, yes, you, step right up to win today's big prize.”

Don't believe their lies. Their game is rigged. You can't win.

So what can you do?

## Three Rules for Handling a Narcissist

If you're reading this chapter, you've likely been dealing with a narcissist for some time. You may be at your wit's end. Or you may have given up and given in to their games. You're looking for a way to stand up for yourself, to make yourself heard by someone who isn't interested in hearing what you have to say. To try to find the normal human being on the other side of the conversation that you *know* has to be there somewhere. To unrig the game.

If you're okay with the idea—and it doesn't feel too weird—take a big breath and tell me how you're doing. Say it out loud as though I'm in the room, or simply tell me in your head. What's driving you to equip yourself with the tools to handle narcissistic personalities or behaviors? Is there a particular person in mind? Take a moment to detail it. Write it down if that helps. I won't peek.

By defining the scope of the problem, you're positioning yourself to get the most out of the techniques ahead. The same disclaimer in *The Next Conversation* stands: I'm not a psychologist or therapist. It's important to understand that narcissism is a personality disorder that goes well beyond someone simply acting self-centered. There are deeper writings on this topic by wonderful clinicians like Dr. Ramani Durvasula and Drs. John and Julie Gottman who address the deeper science of the disorder. This chapter is not a replacement but a supplement to those works. I'm sharing communication tools that work because I've seen them work. I want you prepared. I want you ready.

### **Rule #1: Stiff Arm**

A few months back, I ran into an old high school friend at my local grocery store. Spotting each other, we met in the middle of an aisle. We stood next to our carts and caught up on our lives. He told me that he and his wife (whom I also knew from high school) had recently separated. Despite the terrible things he'd told me about her behavior, he seemed almost totally unaffected.

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“How are you keeping such a calm attitude about it in the midst of it all?” I asked, grabbing my kids’ favorite mac and cheese.

He grinned, shaking his head. “Hashtag unbothered, my man.”

“Say what?” I said, now smiling, with one eyebrow raised.

“Hashtag unbothered. It’s what I tell myself anytime she starts up at me again and calling me names,” he told me. “I figure, every step away from her is a step toward me. So, the best thing, I’ve found, is to be unbothered.”

If you don’t want to get cut by a narcissist’s words, don’t put your energy within reach. Keep your words at an arms-length in the conversation. Become disinterested in what they have to say. Make your responses brief. Less opinion, more fact. Almost as if you’re commenting from outside of the situation. It’s not about proving anything or teaching them a lesson. It’s about keeping yourself hashtag unbothered.

### **What to Say**

The key is to give short, neutral phrases. Here are some of my go-tos:

- “Noted.”
- “That’s good to know.”
- “I get it.”
- “I can see that.”

Mind you, you have to stay neutral no matter what flagrant thing they say. If you struggle to stay neutral, then go silent. Silence is one of your greatest tools because silence can never be misquoted. It's that golden rule of "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." It's better to be quiet and accused of indifference than to say something more inflammatory and lose control altogether.

As the temperature rises in conversation with a narcissist, becoming impersonal and disinterested is the stiff arm you need to have at the ready. When you choose to argue or confront them with phrases like "Why can't you just listen?" or "You always have to make this about you," you're only hurting *yourself*. The resolution will always come back around to their grandiosity. The end of the fight will always turn to favor their arrogance. There is no path to making them understand you or forcing them to feel for you.

Remember, the game is rigged.

### Rule #2: Flip the Focus

I once took a neurosurgeon's deposition that argued my client didn't need surgery despite MRIs and other surgeons' testimony to the contrary. This neurosurgeon wasn't my client's treating doctor. He had been retained (i.e., paid for) by the other side of the lawsuit. So from the outset, we were against each other.

I have many great relationships with physicians, and I highly respect their profession. This guy, though, had what you call a God complex. He dismissed every question with



arrogance and redirected each topic with condescension. No matter the question, he responded with smugness and evasion. It got old real quick.

Having deposed his type before, I knew arguing with him wasn't going to work. Instead, I decided to flip the focus of his answers from proving *me* wrong to proving the *jury* wrong.

"You're here to tell the jury that my client's injury isn't serious?" I asked, framing the stakes for him right away.

He scoffed. "I don't think it's as serious as you're making it out to be."

I paused for five seconds, letting the room grow quiet before lowering my voice. "And you believe the jury will find that explanation acceptable?"

Realizing that his reputation was now at stake, he quickly changed his tone. He cleared his throat and sat up straighter. "Um, well, let me—uh, let me clarify," he stammered, visibly softening his response. "I'm just articulating that while surgery might not be necessary, the injury does have certain serious elements to it."

"Serious elements?" I asked, maintaining the pressure.

He hesitated. "I, uh, yes, any subject of surgery can be—is, serious."

"Because this is a serious injury, isn't it?" I pressed.

"C-correct," he replied.

Instead of trying to win the argument with him head-on or prove myself right, I shifted the burden onto him to explain himself in a way that would pass in front of other people. He needed an audience whose opinion mattered

more than mine. His ego desperately desired to win over the jury. And I knew this.

When you're one-on-one with a narcissist, avoid the immediate argument of proving them wrong by flipping their focus toward their reputation or their image to other people. Why? Because a narcissist cares more about their reputation than they care about you. How special they look to others will always come before how they're perceived by you.

Here's what flipping the focus can sound like for you when a narcissist oversteps or makes a dismissive or inappropriate comment:

- "If you think that's okay, that's your choice."
- "If you think that's a good look for you, that's fine."
- "And you're comfortable with other people seeing it that way?"
- "And you think people will like that?"

Flipping the focus works well anytime you're dealing with someone who thrives on dominance. They don't do empathy. They don't mind hurting you, but they will do anything to avoid even slightly hurting their reputation. By shifting their attention to how their actions or words might be perceived by others, you're speaking a language they care about. You're helping them achieve self-preservation in the eyes of others.

This tactic is not about winning the argument. It's about defusing their power over you by forcing them to reconsider their stance. Instead of being the target of their manipulations, you redirect the spotlight onto their own behavior, making them accountable to an external audience—even if it's only a hypothetical one. Here's an even subtler approach for moments when confrontation might escalate:

- “I’m curious how others might interpret that.”
- “I wonder how others might perceive that.”

A narcissist's image, whether real or fabricated, is their greatest asset. When you say, “If you think that's a good look” or “I wonder how others might perceive that,” it forces them to confront how their actions might undermine their carefully curated facade. It's no longer about you and them. It's about them versus the judgment of others. And that's where their vulnerability lies.

By keeping your tone neutral and unprovocative, you avoid inflaming the situation while still asserting control. Silence can also play a role here. Sometimes it's enough to let their words hang in the air. Narcissists are often uncomfortable with prolonged silence, as it leaves too much room for others to judge their behavior.

The beauty of flipping the focus is that it doesn't require you to prove yourself or fight harder to be heard. Instead, you put the weight of the situation back on them, where it belongs.

### Rule #3: Stop Pulling on Them and Start Pouring into You

You don't need a story here because we've all been burned by this truth.

Don't look to receive something the other person can't give. If you're looking for validation from a narcissist, whether it's respect, empathy, or even basic decency, you're going to be disappointed. People cannot give you what they cannot give to themselves. Someone who thrives on control and manipulation is not going to suddenly start offering understanding or care just because you need it.

It's time for radical acceptance. That means accepting who they truly are and letting go of the fantasy that you can change them, fix them, or make them see the light. Let go of who you hoped they'd be. It's time to stop pulling on them and start pouring into you.

You're holding the pitcher of water, always giving and giving into everyone else's cup until there's nothing left. Instead, grab the pitcher and pour into your peace. Pour into your strength. You will find so much joy, so much clarity, in remembering who *you* are and reclaiming your energy.

To introduce you to this mindset, this one technique will help you pour your energy back into yourself rather than losing it to the rigged game.

#### The Power of Detachment

Detaching from another person's outbursts and bad behavior is an incredible skill. I find that some people struggle with

or dislike the idea of detaching because it suggests giving up and waving the white flag. But that's not it at all. Detachment isn't surrender. It's strategy. It's your hashtag unbothered. It's choosing not to let their chaos become your chaos.

You're detaching not from what they say but from what their words say about you. Here's how I like to think of it: If I tell you that your purple shirt looks ugly and you're wearing a green shirt, you won't take my comments personally. You'd hear what I said, but there would be no effect. Why? Because my words are clearly not true, and you know it. You're wearing a green shirt, not a purple shirt.

Detachment works the same way. If you know you're a good person, if you know you're not what they claim you are, if you know your "shirt is green," you make the conscious choice to dissociate the impact of their words from your sense of self. Their comment doesn't define you. It defines *them*.

Detaching isn't about disengaging from the truth. It's about refusing to carry the weight of their falsehoods. You hear what they say, but you don't carry it with you. You protect your peace by recognizing the words for what they are: someone else's projections, not your reality.

- Instead of taking it personally and asking, "How could you say that to me?" ask, "How do you feel when you say that to me?"
- Replace "That's so rude!" or "I can't believe you said that to me!" with "What an odd thing to say out loud."

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See how you're treating the situation from a distance? Detachment isn't indifference. It's the choice to see yourself past their lies. Every moment you spend pulling on a narcissist, trying to reason, explain, or argue, is energy wasted. Instead, pour back into yourself.

- **See a mental health professional:** Amazing things can happen when you choose to talk out loud in a safe space.
- **Rediscover your passions:** Spend time doing what brings you joy, like hobbies, exercise, or spending time with supportive friends. When was the last time you did what you wanted to do?
- **Set personal goals:** Whether it's career growth, a fitness journey, or a creative project, focus on building something that adds to your life. Setting goals and grabbing for personal wins is healthy.

Mind you, don't confuse reinvesting energy into yourself with distraction. Don't go around telling friends you signed up for a half-marathon and call that growth or healing. How do you know the difference between reinvesting in yourself and distracting yourself from your current problems? When reinvesting, you're building something lasting, like a stronger mindset, a better version of yourself, or a foundation for future peace. Distraction, on the other hand, is temporary. It might make you feel better in the moment,

but it doesn't move you forward. The key is to ask yourself, "Am I avoiding the issue, or am I equipping myself to handle it better?"

The moment you begin to build your awareness in real time for what's happening in conversation with a narcissist—when you realize you're in the game—is the exact moment you'll see how the tools above can be true lifesavers.

And to make sure you're even more prepared, I want to equip you to handle a toxic personality's favorite weapon: gaslighting.

## Who Turned on the Gaslighting?

You may not know what gaslighting is, but you definitely know what it feels like. Gaslighting is a form of emotional manipulation where someone tries to make you doubt your own perceptions or memory. It's a common tactic used as part of manipulative and toxic behaviors. Gaslighting is not just someone lying to you. It's a calculated attempt to make you second-guess reality. A gaslighter's goal is to gain control by undermining your confidence in your own mind. Narcissists do it. And everyday normal people can do it too, even unintentionally.

Imagine that at the end of the night you tell someone, "I felt hurt by what you said at dinner." A gaslighter might reply in any of these ways:

- **"I never said that."** Even though you clearly remember what they said, the other person outright denies it.

- **“You honestly need help. No normal person would have taken it that way.”** Now they’re shifting the issue onto you, hinting that your mental health is to blame.
- **“Look, you’re imagining things. This is exactly why everyone talks behind your back. I always try to defend you, but you’re making it difficult.”** Suddenly, you’re left wondering if your friends are truly your friends and whether you truly are imagining things.

By the end of the exchange, you’re confused and doubting yourself. *Did I overreact? Did they really say that? Am I crazy?* The seed of doubt that gaslighters love to plant begins to grow. Gaslighting is often subtle, but over time, these kinds of tactics can make you question your feelings, your recollection of events, and even your sanity. Most significantly, it can wear down your trust in yourself.

What’s the difference between gaslighting and a simple white lie? A lie is a single act of deception aimed at making you doubt the truth. Gaslighting is a pattern aimed at making you doubt *everything*, including yourself. Another way to tell the difference is to look at the motive. One lie may be a one-time act to hide the truth (e.g., they didn’t eat the last piece of cake when they did). One lie may also be part of a sustained strategy not only to deceive but also to disorient and control you over time.

If this sounds familiar, the first step is recognizing it for what it is. Gaslighting isn’t about you. It’s about the gaslighter’s need for control over you or the situation in order



to protect themselves. Some people do it for manipulation. Others do it because they want to shield themselves from accountability. The examples are endless. The next step is learning how to respond in a way that protects your peace and keeps you grounded.

## How to Respond to Gaslighting

### 1. Use neutral, repetitive phrases.

- When they say, “You’re being crazy right now,” avoid defending yourself with, “How am I crazy?” Instead, calmly say:
  - “I understand you disagree with me.”
  - If they argue, simply repeat as needed, “I understand you disagree.”
- If they deny your reality by saying, “I never said that,” avoid arguing back and forth. Instead, respond with:
  - “That’s what I heard.” This response puts you in a stronger position than falling into the *yes you did*, *no I didn’t* that leads nowhere.
- If they claim, “You’re imagining things,” assertively respond:
  - “I do not imagine facts.”

## 2. Trust your gut.

Think of gaslighting as if someone is digging a big hole. If your gut tells you that you know something isn't adding up, resist the urge to fill the hole back up. The more they can have you distracted by digging holes in your story, the less in control you'll be. Instead, trust what you know to be true and put down the shovel.

- Use phrases like:
  - “We remember things differently.” This is incredibly powerful and grounding to say.
  - “That wasn’t my experience.”

See how these phrases keep control in your hands? Repeat them calmly to assert your truth without the exhausting back-and-forth.

## 3. Shift the focus from the past to the future.

Gaslighters often manipulate by rehashing the past to confuse the present. A key giveaway is when they try to retell the whole situation and storyline as if you weren't physically there to see it. Refuse to play along. Instead, redirect the conversation:

- “I have no interest in debating the past. My only interest is agreeing on the future.”

- If they attack your mental health with comments like “You need help,” respond calmly with “And I need someone who is helpful.” Here, the focus is not on the past but what you need in the future.

These responses shift the power dynamic and keep the focus on moving forward. Your true power lives there, where your own truth moves in a way that doesn’t chase their narrative but grounds itself in your well-being.

Narcissists. Manipulators. Toxic personalities. Gaslighters. Sigh.

It can be a dark world if you don’t know where to look for the light. Find your favorite tool from this chapter and use it. Really use it. Find your own hashtag unbothered to keep you out of the rigged carnival game and tied to your own self-worth. And most of all, don’t be afraid to walk away and begin again.

## Chapter Summary

- Narcissists play a rigged carnival game. It looks beatable, but it’s not. By practicing the power of detachment, you’ll stop pulling on them and start pouring into yourself. That’s where you truly win.
- Gaslighting is about control, not truth. It’s a sustained pattern of manipulation designed to make you question your perception and even your sense of

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self. Recognizing it for what it is—a tactic to disorient and control—helps you protect your emotional well-being.

- Clarity comes when you refuse to engage them and begin to trust you. Stop wasting energy debating the past or chasing their version of the events. Use phrases like “I see things differently” as grounding tactics that keep you clearheaded and above the chaos they try to create.