

The Victim's Trajectory in Covert Narcissistic Abuse: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis

Introduction

Covert narcissistic abuse represents a particularly insidious and damaging form of psychological manipulation, distinguished by its subtle, indirect, and often veiled nature.¹ Unlike overt narcissism, which is typically characterized by grandiose displays and an obvious sense of entitlement, covert narcissism operates beneath the surface, making it exceptionally challenging for victims, onlookers, and even some professionals to recognize.³ The abuser, often presenting with an air of shyness, sensitivity, or even victimhood, weaves a complex web of emotional control that can leave their target feeling confused, doubting their sanity, and profoundly traumatized.⁶ The very "covert" quality of this abuse is not merely a characteristic of the perpetrator but a fundamental element shaping the entirety of the victim's experience, often leading to prolonged periods of unrecognized abuse and, consequently, more deeply entrenched psychological, behavioral, and physiological sequelae.

This report aims to meticulously chart the victim's trajectory through the harrowing landscape of covert narcissistic abuse. It will begin by examining the pre-existing vulnerabilities—traits, histories, and relational patterns—that may render an individual a desirable and sustainable target for a covert narcissist. Subsequently, it will detail the complex symptomatology that emerges during and after the period of sustained abuse, encompassing psychological disturbances, behavioral transformations, and physiological manifestations. Finally, and crucially, this analysis will explore the tragic synergy where these pre-existing vulnerabilities are not only exploited but are also magnified and distorted by the abusive experience, shaping the victim's post-abuse presentation. The overarching goal is to develop a holistic model that illuminates the multifaceted journey of the victim, fostering a deeper understanding of the profound impact of this hidden form of abuse. This comprehensive understanding is paramount, as the difficulty in recognizing covert narcissistic patterns means that victims may endure years of manipulation before the abuse is identified, if at all.³ The hiddenness of the abuse, therefore, becomes a primary driver of the severity and complexity of the victim's trajectory, underscoring the urgent need for greater awareness to facilitate early intervention and effective support.

Part 1: The Target Profile – Pre-Abuse Vulnerabilities and Selection by the Covert Narcissist

The selection of a target by a covert narcissist is not a random occurrence but often

involves a nuanced interplay between the abuser's specific psychological needs and the potential victim's characteristics. This section dissects the constellation of traits, histories, and relational patterns that can render an individual particularly susceptible to the covert narcissist's subtle yet persistent manipulation, making them a "desirable and sustainable target." It is crucial to approach this analysis not as a form of victim-blaming, but as an endeavor to understand the complex dynamics that facilitate these destructive relationships.

1.1. The Constellation of Susceptibility: Inherent Traits and Dispositions

Certain inherent personality traits and dispositions, while often positive in healthy contexts, can inadvertently become vulnerabilities when encountered by an individual with covert narcissistic tendencies. Research and clinical observations suggest that individuals possessing high levels of empathy, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are frequently targeted.⁷ Highly empathetic and compassionate individuals may be particularly attractive to covert narcissists because their nature inclines them to overlook initial red flags and prioritize the perceived needs or distress of the narcissist.⁷ The "empath," characterized by a rich emotional world and a strong need for connection, can become a "gold mine of narcissistic supply" due to their inner beauty, often coupled with weaker boundaries.¹²

Agreeableness, the tendency to be cooperative, kind, and avoid conflict, can make it difficult for an individual to confront the subtle manipulations and boundary violations characteristic of covert abuse. Similarly, conscientiousness—a trait encompassing responsibility, diligence, and a strong moral compass—can be exploited. Manipulators frequently use guilt and shame as primary weapons, and these tactics are particularly effective against conscientious individuals who inherently care about fairness, strive to do what is right, and dislike being perceived as wrong or unfair.¹¹ A covert narcissist might complain about perceived unfairness, and because the conscientious target takes such complaints seriously, they may internalize blame or try harder to appease the narcissist, unaware that this is a manipulative ploy.¹¹

The covert narcissist often presents with "indications of low self-esteem," "symptoms of anxiety or depression," or a pronounced "victim mentality".¹ This presentation can strategically, if unconsciously, draw in individuals high in empathy and conscientiousness. These individuals are not just passively attractive for their supply; their traits make them more likely to try and compensate for the narcissist's apparent deficits. An empathetic person may try to understand and soothe the narcissist's 'pain,' while a conscientious person might feel a responsibility to help or stabilize them. The victim's inherent strengths are thus instrumentalized by the abuser, whose

subtle control tactics are less likely to be met with direct confrontation by someone agreeable and more likely to be "managed" or "fixed" by someone empathetic and conscientious.

Furthermore, a highly trusting nature or a strong desire to see the good in others can become a significant vulnerability. When combined with a pre-existing tendency towards self-blame, this creates a scenario where the victim is more predisposed to doubt their own perceptions, memories, and feelings when faced with the narcissist's gaslighting and denials, rather than questioning the narcissist's sincerity or intentions.¹⁵ This dynamic lays a fertile ground for long-term manipulation and control.

1.2. Attachment and Relational History: The "Blueprint" for Abuse

An individual's attachment style and relational history significantly influence their vulnerability to narcissistic abuse. There is a strong correlation between insecure attachment styles—particularly anxious or disorganized patterns—and susceptibility to such dynamics.¹⁷ A history of codependency, ingrained people-pleasing behaviors, or, critically, having been raised by a parent with narcissistic traits can create a "blueprint" for abusive relationships, making the covert narcissist's patterns feel disturbingly familiar, even if destructive.¹⁷

Narcissistic parenting, for instance, is a profound source of relational trauma. Narcissistic parents are typically incapable of providing the consistent empathetic attunement necessary for a child to develop secure attachment.¹⁷ Instead, children are often subjected to a "rollercoaster of idealizing and devaluing projections," where authentic emotional expression may be punished and conditional behaviors rewarded.¹⁷ This environment, characterized by dynamics such as manipulation, blame, gaslighting, and boundary violations, fosters insecure attachment. Children in such families may dissociate from their natural feelings, deny the abuse, and blame themselves for the problems, developing underlying shame, a hyperactivated nervous system, and boundary confusion.¹⁷

As these children mature, those who develop empathy (as opposed to identifying with the narcissistic parent and becoming abusive themselves) often adopt patterns of "self-abnegation"—sacrificing their own needs and interests for others.¹⁷ This pattern, characterized by disrupted self-agency and unsafe boundaries, renders them highly vulnerable to narcissistic abuse in adulthood, as they may unconsciously seek out or be drawn to relational dynamics that mirror their early experiences.¹⁷ Codependency, often rooted in similar family-of-origin dynamics where it was unsafe to express pain or prioritize one's own needs, creates a "lock-and-key" relationship with narcissism.¹⁹

Individuals with codependent traits often have a "need to be needed" and may derive their sense of self from taking care of a "sick" or demanding partner, making them an ideal match for a narcissist who requires the relationship to revolve entirely around them.¹⁹

The "blueprint" established by such early relational trauma is not merely a passive vulnerability. It can manifest as an active, though often unconscious, seeking of relational dynamics that promise a resolution to past wounds or a "corrective emotional experience." The covert narcissist, adept at "love bombing" and feigning deep empathy and understanding in the initial stages of a relationship⁷, can appear to be the very person who will finally provide the validation and connection that was missing in earlier life. This intense initial connection can feel like the answer to a deep-seated psychological yearning for those with insecure attachment, making the subsequent manipulation and devaluation even more disorienting and creating a powerful trauma bond that is difficult to break.⁵ The victim may cling to the hope of regaining that initial "ideal" state, mistaking it for genuine love rather than a calculated prelude to exploitation. This highlights an intergenerational transmission of relational trauma, where individuals raised in narcissistic family systems may either replicate narcissistic traits or become susceptible to narcissistic partners, thus perpetuating a painful cycle.

1.3. The "Fixer" or "Caretaker" Archetype: Compassion Weaponized

Individuals who embody the "fixer" or "caretaker" archetype are often characterized by a strong, sometimes compulsive, need to help, support, or "fix" partners they perceive as wounded, vulnerable, or in need of rescue.²² This tendency, frequently stemming from early life experiences such as growing up in unstable environments or with parental disapproval, can lead these individuals to equate their self-worth with their ability to solve others' problems.²² The covert narcissist, with their common initial presentation of vulnerability, shyness, low self-esteem, or a victim narrative¹, directly and effectively exploits this compassionate tendency.

The fixer archetype is particularly susceptible to the *covert* narcissist because the latter's apparent need for help can feel more genuine, less overtly demanding, and more subtly appealing than an overt narcissist's grandiose entitlement. The covert narcissist may subtly signal distress, complain of being misunderstood or underappreciated, or present a history of hardship that triggers the fixer's ingrained desire to nurture, repair, and make things right.¹⁴ They are drawn to caring and compassionate people who can provide the attention and validation they crave, although their "giving" is always instrumental, aimed at getting something in return.²

The fixer sees an opportunity to apply their skills, to make a difference, and to potentially heal the covert narcissist, thereby validating their own role and worth.

This dynamic quickly becomes exploitative. The fixer invests deeply—emotionally, mentally, and sometimes financially—in "saving" or "improving" the covert narcissist, who, in turn, receives a steady stream of narcissistic supply through this focused attention, care, and validation of their victim status.² However, because the narcissist rarely takes genuine responsibility or makes lasting changes²⁴, the fixer's efforts become an endless, draining cycle. The fixer's investment in "improving" the narcissist can also blind them to the abusive patterns. They may attribute the narcissist's negative behaviors—passive aggression, emotional unavailability, subtle devaluations—to the narcissist's "pain," "trauma," or "fragility," thereby excusing the abuse and prolonging their entanglement in the toxic dynamic. The very compassion that defines the fixer is weaponized against them, turning their desire to heal into a mechanism of their own exploitation.

Children scapegoated in narcissistic families often develop caretaker or problem-solver roles, being exploited for the services they provide at the expense of their own needs.²⁵ While this describes the development of the archetype in childhood, these patterns often persist into adulthood, predisposing them to similar dynamics. The covert narcissist may sulk to gain attention and flattery¹⁴, a tactic that effectively draws in a partner with a propensity to fix or soothe.

1.4. The Impact of Unawareness: Navigating an Unmarked Minefield

A significant factor contributing to the longevity and severity of covert narcissistic abuse is the pervasive lack of public and individual awareness regarding its specific, subtle tactics. Covert narcissism, by its very definition, is difficult to spot, and it can take victims years, even decades, to recognize the insidious patterns of manipulation they are enduring.² This lack of awareness transforms the relationship into an unmarked minefield, where the victim navigates daily interactions without understanding the hidden psychological dangers.

Covert narcissists employ a range of elusive tactics, including quiet devaluing, emotional withholding, passive aggression, and, critically, plausible deniability and feigned victimhood.¹ Plausible deniability is a cornerstone of their manipulative strategy; they operate in ambiguous "grey areas," ensuring their actions can always be reframed as harmless, well-intentioned, or a misunderstanding.²⁶ For example, a cutting remark can be disguised as "concern," or passive-aggressive silence can be blamed on the victim's perceived insensitivity.⁶ Gaslighting, another key tactic, is often

cloaked in guises such as feigned reasonableness, joking, tough realism, or even sympathy, all designed to make the victim doubt their own perceptions and sanity while the narcissist sidesteps accountability.¹⁶

This lack of awareness extends beyond simply not knowing the clinical term "covert narcissism." It reflects a broader societal deficit in understanding forms of psychological abuse that do not involve overt aggression or easily identifiable markers of harm. Covert tactics prey on common social norms, such as giving others the benefit of the doubt, being empathetic to perceived suffering, or avoiding conflict. When a covert narcissist feigns victimhood or offers a "reasonable" explanation for hurtful behavior, the victim—and often onlookers or even untrained therapists ⁹—may struggle to label the interaction as abusive. The victim, lacking a clear framework or vocabulary for these subtle yet persistent psychological assaults, is left mired in confusion, self-doubt, and a distorted sense of reality.⁵ This internal turmoil, coupled with the abuser's ability to maintain an innocent or misunderstood facade, prevents the victim from clearly identifying the pattern of abuse, thus prolonging their entanglement and deepening the emotional damage. The experience of parental projective identification, a sophisticated form of narcissistic abuse, can be likened to enduring sustained gaslighting, where the child's reality is so consistently distorted that they may come to believe they fabricated their own trauma.²⁷ This profound level of reality erosion underscores the devastating impact of being unaware of the manipulative dynamics at play. Educational efforts must, therefore, focus on the specific behavioral markers of covert abuse to empower individuals to recognize these destructive patterns far earlier.

Table 1: Summary of Pre-Abuse Vulnerability Factors and Covert Narcissistic Exploitation

Vulnerability Factor	Description of Factor	How Covert Narcissist Exploits This
High Empathy	Innate ability to understand and share the feelings of others; strong desire to connect and alleviate suffering. ⁷	Presents as vulnerable, misunderstood, or in need of support, eliciting the victim's empathy and care, which becomes a source of narcissistic supply. Victim may overlook red flags due to compassion. ²

High Agreeableness	Tendency to be cooperative, kind, conflict-avoidant, and trusting; desire to see the good in others. ¹⁰	Leverages victim's desire to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation to push boundaries subtly and maintain control without overt aggression. Victim is less likely to challenge manipulative behaviors. ¹¹
High Conscientiousness	Characterized by responsibility, diligence, strong moral compass, and a desire to be fair and do what is right; prone to self-blame when accused of wrongdoing. ¹⁰	Uses guilt-tripping and accusations of unfairness or inadequacy. Victim's conscientiousness leads them to internalize blame, doubt themselves, and try harder to meet the narcissist's (often unreasonable) expectations. ¹¹
Insecure Attachment Style	Often stemming from early relational trauma (e.g., narcissistic parenting), leading to anxiety in relationships, fear of abandonment, or a disorganized approach to intimacy. ¹⁷	Initial love-bombing and feigned empathy create a false sense of security and deep connection, appealing to the victim's unmet attachment needs. This fosters a strong trauma bond, making it harder to disengage when devaluation begins. ⁷
Codependency	Pattern of prioritizing others' needs above one's own, often deriving self-worth from being needed or caretaking; difficulty setting boundaries. ¹⁹	The narcissist's constant need for attention, validation, and control is readily met by the codependent's need to be needed and tendency to over-give. The victim's lack of boundaries allows for progressive enmeshment. ¹⁹
"Fixer" Archetype	Compulsive need to help, support, or "fix" others, often stemming from early life experiences where this behavior was a coping mechanism or source of	Presents as damaged, victimized, or needing rescue, triggering the fixer's desire to heal and repair. The fixer's efforts become a source of narcissistic supply, and they get caught in a cycle of trying

	validation. ²²	to "save" the unchangeable narcissist. ²
Lack of Awareness	Unfamiliarity with the subtle tactics of covert narcissism (e.g., gaslighting, plausible deniability, feigned victimhood) and psychological abuse in general. ²	Employs ambiguous and deniable abusive behaviors. The victim, unable to identify or name the manipulation, doubts their own perceptions and sanity, internalizes blame, and remains in the abusive dynamic for extended periods, often unaware of the true nature of the abuse. ⁹

Part 2: Symptomology and Behavioral Transformation During and After Abuse

Sustained exposure to the psychological machinations of a covert narcissist inflicts a wide array of debilitating symptoms and profound behavioral transformations upon the victim. These manifestations are not isolated incidents but rather a complex constellation of responses to chronic relational trauma, impacting the victim's psychological, cognitive, behavioral, relational, and even physiological well-being.

2.1. Complex Trauma (C-PTSD): The Signature Wound of Prolonged Abuse

Covert narcissistic abuse, characterized by its ongoing and inescapable nature within an intimate relationship, frequently leads to the development of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD).⁹ C-PTSD is distinguished from classic PTSD by its origins in prolonged, repeated relational trauma, such as domestic violence or childhood abuse, rather than a single acute event.³⁰ The symptoms of C-PTSD encompass the core features of PTSD—including re-experiencing the trauma (e.g., emotional flashbacks, nightmares), avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, and persistent hyperarousal (e.g., hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, sleep disturbances).²⁹

However, C-PTSD in the context of covert narcissistic abuse presents with additional, deeply impactful disturbances, primarily in three domains:

1. **Emotional Dysregulation:** Victims often experience intense and overwhelming emotions, such as anger, sadness, fear, and shame, with significant difficulty managing these states. This can manifest as heightened emotional reactivity, impulsive behaviors, or, conversely, emotional numbing.⁵ The covert narcissist's

pattern of intermittent reinforcement (cycles of idealization and devaluation) and emotional unpredictability directly cultivates this dysregulation.

2. **Disturbances in Self-Perception:** This is a hallmark of C-PTSD stemming from narcissistic abuse. Victims frequently develop a profoundly negative self-concept, characterized by persistent feelings of worthlessness, guilt, shame, failure, and self-blame.²⁹ The narcissist's relentless, albeit often subtle, criticism, devaluing, and gaslighting systematically erode the victim's self-esteem and sense of inherent value.⁵ A toxic inner critic often takes root, echoing the abuser's disparaging messages.
3. **Disturbances in Relationships:** Survivors typically face severe difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships.³⁰ This includes profound trust issues, fear of intimacy, problems with boundaries, and a tendency to either become socially isolated or, in some cases, re-enter similarly abusive dynamics due to unresolved trauma and distorted relational templates.¹⁸

The C-PTSD resulting from covert narcissistic abuse is uniquely characterized by this profound distortion of self-identity and relational capacity. This is because the abuse specifically targets the victim's core sense of reality, worth, and ability to trust through insidious, ongoing psychological warfare, rather than through discrete, identifiable traumatic events. The covert narcissist's consistent undermining of the victim's perceptions and emotional stability directly cultivates the emotional dysregulation, negative self-concept, and relational difficulties that are the defining features of C-PTSD.³⁰

2.2. Cognitive Dissonance and Reality Erosion: The Gaslighting Effect

Chronic gaslighting is a cornerstone of covert narcissistic abuse and has a devastating impact on the victim's cognitive functioning and perception of reality.¹ Gaslighting is a deliberate manipulation tactic where the abuser attempts to convince the victim that their perceptions, memories, and even their sanity are unreliable.¹⁵ The covert narcissist achieves this through various subtle means: denying events occurred, distorting facts, questioning the victim's memory ("Your memory is terrible!"), trivializing their feelings ("You're too sensitive"), or projecting their own behaviors onto the victim ("You're the one lying").¹ These tactics are often delivered under guises of reasonableness, concern, or even humor, making them harder to identify and resist.¹⁶

The persistent invalidation and manipulation inherent in gaslighting lead to severe self-doubt, chronic confusion, memory problems, and a fundamental distrust of one's own mind.⁵ Victims begin to question their ability to accurately perceive reality,

leading to increased dependence on the abuser for validation and interpretation of events.¹⁵ This erosion of reality is by design, intended to keep the victim off-balance and more susceptible to control.⁶

This state of profound self-doubt and confusion fuels intense cognitive dissonance.²¹ Cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort experienced when holding two or more conflicting beliefs, values, or perceptions simultaneously.³² In the context of narcissistic abuse, the victim grapples with irreconcilable realities: the charming, loving person the narcissist presented during the idealization phase versus the cruel, manipulative abuser they experience during devaluation²¹; or the belief that "this person loves me" versus the evidence that "this person is systematically harming me." This internal conflict is intensely distressing, creating a sense of urgency, panic, and dread.²¹

To reduce this painful dissonance, victims may unconsciously adopt several coping strategies that unfortunately reinforce the trauma bond and prolong the abuse.³² They might minimize the abuse ("It's not that bad"), rationalize the abuser's behavior ("They're just stressed," "They don't mean it"), or engage in self-blame ("If I were better, they wouldn't treat me this way"). By altering their own cognitions to align more closely with the abuser's narrative, they reduce the immediate psychological discomfort, but at the cost of further detaching from their own reality and becoming more enmeshed with the abuser.²¹ The subtlety of covert gaslighting makes this internal "choice" to believe the abuser's version of events seem more plausible to the victim, thereby deepening the cognitive dissonance trap. Therapeutic interventions must, therefore, prioritize the validation of the victim's original perceptions and assist in deconstructing the abuser's false narratives to resolve this debilitating cognitive dissonance.

2.3. The Emergence of "Narcissistic Fleas": Reactive Abuse and Adopted Behaviors

A particularly distressing and confusing consequence for victims of prolonged covert narcissistic abuse is the development of what are colloquially termed "narcissistic fleas".³³ This phenomenon describes the victim, as a survival mechanism or due to the toxic environment, adopting some of the behavioral patterns of their abuser.³³ These are not indicative of the victim possessing a narcissistic personality themselves but are rather maladaptive coping strategies developed in response to sustained provocation, emotional deprivation, and an environment where healthy communication and emotional expression are impossible.³³

Manifestations of "fleas" can include:

- **Reactive Abuse:** This involves the victim lashing out verbally or emotionally after enduring prolonged provocation, gaslighting, or emotional neglect.³³ Having their needs consistently dismissed and their reality denied, the victim may reach a breaking point and react in ways that are uncharacteristic of their typical demeanor.
- **Emotional Withdrawal:** Similar to the narcissist's use of silent treatment or stonewalling, the victim may learn to withdraw emotionally as a form of self-protection or to avoid further conflict.³³
- **Manipulative Tendencies:** In some instances, to navigate the treacherous dynamics of the relationship and attempt to get their basic needs met or to defend themselves, victims might resort to behaviors that could be construed as manipulative, learned from the abuser's playbook.³³
- **Passive-Aggression:** Frustration and anger that cannot be expressed directly may manifest as passive-aggressive behaviors.³³

The development of these "fleas" is a profound indicator of the extent to which the abusive environment has distorted the victim's behavioral repertoire and moral compass. These are learned, reactive responses born out of desperation, powerlessness, and a toxic environment.³⁴ Crucially, the covert narcissist often deliberately provokes these reactions in the victim. Once the victim reacts, the narcissist can then seize upon this behavior as "proof" that the victim is the unstable, irrational, or even abusive one, thereby reinforcing the gaslighting cycle and deepening the victim's self-doubt and shame.³³ The victim often experiences intense guilt, regret, and confusion over these adopted behaviors, further eroding their sense of self.³⁴

It is vital to differentiate these reactive behaviors from genuine narcissistic personality traits. A key distinction lies in the accompanying emotional experience and self-awareness. Victims exhibiting "fleas" are typically distressed by their own actions, feel remorse, and question their own character—often fearing they have become like their abuser.³³ True narcissistic individuals, by contrast, generally lack this self-reflective capacity, empathy, and genuine remorse for their harmful behaviors; their actions are ego-syntonic, meaning they are consistent with their self-image.³ Understanding this distinction is critical for both the victim's healing and for accurate clinical assessment.

2.4. Relational and Social Devastation: Isolation and Pervasive Distrust

Covert narcissistic abuse wreaks havoc on the victim's relational world, leading to

profound trust issues that permeate all relationships, not just romantic ones, and often results in significant social isolation.⁵ The systematic betrayal, manipulation, and emotional invalidation experienced at the hands of an intimate partner fundamentally shatter the victim's ability to trust others and even themselves.³¹

Patterns of social isolation are a common outcome. This isolation is often multifaceted:

- **Orchestrated by the Abuser:** Narcissists frequently work to isolate their victims from friends, family, and other support networks.⁵ This may be done subtly by undermining relationships, creating drama, or making it difficult for the victim to maintain outside connections, thereby increasing the victim's dependence and the abuser's control.
- **Self-Imposed by the Victim:** Due to the trauma, victims may self-isolate.³⁷ This can stem from a deep-seated fear of new people, an inability to trust anyone's motives, or a belief that others cannot understand their experience.³¹ Social interactions can become triggering, and the hypervigilance developed during the abuse can make it exhausting to engage with others.³⁷
- **Consequence of Shame and Confusion:** The profound confusion, self-doubt, and shame instilled by the abuse can make it incredibly difficult for victims to articulate their experiences.⁶ They may fear not being believed, being judged, or being misunderstood, leading them to withdraw from potential sources of support.

The development of pervasive distrust is a core relational wound. Having had their trust exploited in such an intimate and damaging way, survivors often struggle to believe in the sincerity or kindness of others.³⁵ Compliments may feel like manipulation, and acts of kindness may be met with suspicion.³⁶ This distrust extends to their own judgment, as the gaslighting has taught them not to rely on their perceptions.⁵ This creates a significant barrier to forming new, healthy relationships and accepting support, thereby compounding the isolation and hindering the healing process. Rebuilding trust, both in oneself and in others, becomes a central and often lengthy task in recovery, frequently requiring safe, validating environments such as specialized therapy or support groups composed of individuals with similar experiences.¹⁸

2.5. Physiological Manifestations: The Body Keeps the Score

The chronic, unrelenting stress of enduring covert narcissistic abuse takes a significant toll not only on the victim's psychological state but also on their physical health.¹⁸ The adage "the body keeps the score" is particularly relevant here, as prolonged emotional and psychological trauma often manifests in a range of

psychosomatic symptoms and stress-related physical ailments. These physiological symptoms are not merely "side effects" but direct consequences of the body's attempt to cope with an unceasing state of psychological threat, emotional dysregulation, and suppressed emotional expression (such as rage) inherent in the abusive dynamic.⁴⁰

Common physiological manifestations reported by survivors include:

- **Chronic Fatigue:** A pervasive sense of exhaustion that is not alleviated by rest is common.²⁸ This can be linked to the constant mental and emotional energy expended in navigating the abusive relationship, hypervigilance, and sleep disturbances.
- **Sleep Disturbances:** Insomnia, difficulty falling or staying asleep, or nightmares are frequently reported.²⁸ The hyperarousal state associated with trauma can make restful sleep elusive.
- **Gastrointestinal Issues:** Problems such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), acid reflux, indigestion, nausea, and other digestive disturbances are often linked to chronic stress.⁶ The gut-brain axis is highly sensitive to emotional states.
- **Headaches and Muscle Tension:** Frequent headaches, migraines, and chronic muscle pain (particularly in the neck, shoulders, and back) are common somatic expressions of sustained tension and stress.⁶
- **Autoimmune Disorders:** Emerging research suggests a connection between chronic stress, trauma (including emotional abuse and childhood adversity), and the development or exacerbation of autoimmune conditions.⁴⁰ The prolonged activation of the body's stress response system (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, or HPA axis) can lead to chronic inflammation and immune system dysregulation, where the immune system may mistakenly attack the body's own tissues.⁴⁰
- **Fibromyalgia:** Studies have indicated a significant association between a history of trauma (including emotional abuse and childhood trauma) and the onset or severity of fibromyalgia, a condition characterized by widespread musculoskeletal pain, fatigue, sleep problems, and cognitive difficulties.⁴³ Central nervous system sensitization, exacerbated by chronic stress and trauma, is thought to be a key underlying mechanism.⁴³
- **Other Stress-Related Ailments:** Victims may also experience appetite changes, restlessness, increased susceptibility to infections due to a weakened immune response, and cardiovascular issues.²⁸

The constant hypervigilance, anxiety, and often suppressed or dysregulated emotions characteristic of life with a covert narcissist lead to a chronic stress response. This, in

turn, dysregulates multiple bodily systems, including the nervous, endocrine, and immune systems.⁴¹ Medical and psychological professionals must recognize this strong mind-body connection. Addressing the psychological trauma is often essential for alleviating some of these physical symptoms, and conversely, unexplained chronic physical symptoms could serve as an indicator of underlying, perhaps unrecognized, emotional abuse.

Table 2: Categorization of Post-Abuse Symptomology in Victims of Covert Narcissistic Abuse

Symptom Category	Specific Symptoms	Illustrative Link to Covert Narcissistic Abuse
Psychological (C-PTSD Core)	Emotional flashbacks, nightmares, persistent sense of being unsafe, toxic inner critic, intense shame, guilt, worthlessness ²⁹	Result from prolonged, inescapable relational trauma characteristic of covert narcissistic abuse, targeting self-worth and reality. ⁵
	Emotional dysregulation (e.g., intense anger, sadness, anxiety; difficulty managing emotions, impulsivity, or numbing) ⁵	Caused by the abuser's unpredictable behavior, intermittent reinforcement, and invalidation of victim's feelings. ¹
Cognitive	Cognitive dissonance (conflicting thoughts/beliefs about abuser and abuse) ²¹	Fueled by gaslighting and the stark contrast between abuser's charming facade and cruel behavior. ²¹
	Reality erosion, severe self-doubt, memory problems, distrust of own perceptions/sanity ⁵	Direct result of chronic gaslighting and manipulation designed to make victim question their reality. ⁶
Behavioral	"Narcissistic Fleas" (e.g., reactive abuse, emotional withdrawal, adopted manipulative tendencies) ³³	Survival mechanisms or maladaptive coping strategies developed in response to sustained provocation and toxic environment; often exploited by abuser to shift

		blame. ³³
	Avoidance of trauma-related stimuli (people, places, thoughts) ³⁰	Common PTSD symptom; victim tries to avoid re-experiencing the pain associated with the abuse. ²⁹
	Self-destructive behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, unhealthy habits) ¹⁸	Coping mechanisms for overwhelming emotional pain and trauma. ¹⁸
Relational	Profound trust issues (in self and others) ⁵	Stem from systematic betrayal, deceit, and manipulation by the abuser. ¹⁸
	Social isolation (engineered by abuser and/or self-imposed) ⁵	Result of abuser's control tactics, victim's fear, shame, or difficulty articulating the abuse. ¹⁸
	Fear of vulnerability, difficulty forming/maintaining healthy relationships, insecure attachment patterns ⁵	Learned patterns from the abusive relationship; fear of being exploited or hurt again. ⁵
	Difficulty setting boundaries ⁵	Boundaries systematically violated by abuser; victim may lose ability to assert own needs. ¹⁸
Physiological	Chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances (insomnia, nightmares) ²⁸	Result of chronic stress, hyperarousal, and emotional exhaustion. ¹⁸
	Gastrointestinal issues (IBS, acid reflux, nausea), headaches, muscle tension/pain ⁶	Somatic manifestations of sustained stress and emotional distress. ⁴¹
	Autoimmune disorders, weakened immune response	Linked to chronic stress, inflammation, and immune

	40	system dysregulation caused by trauma. ⁴¹
	Fibromyalgia ⁴³	Associated with history of trauma and central nervous system sensitization due to chronic stress. ⁴³

Part 3: The Tragic Synergy – How Pre-existing Traits Shape and Are Magnified by Post-Abuse Symptoms

The journey through covert narcissistic abuse is not only characterized by the imposition of trauma but also by a devastating interaction between the victim's pre-existing traits and the specific nature of the abuse they endure. This section synthesizes the findings from the preceding parts to illuminate this "tragic synergy," demonstrating how inherent qualities and learned relational patterns are not merely exploited but are systematically warped and magnified into profound post-abuse symptoms. The covert narcissist, often unconsciously, targets these very attributes, twisting strengths into vulnerabilities and vulnerabilities into deep-seated wounds.

3.1. From Empathy to Painful Hypervigilance: A Sensitivity Corrupted

Individuals who enter relationships with a naturally high level of empathy possess a keen ability to perceive and resonate with the emotional states of others.¹² This capacity, in healthy contexts, fosters connection, understanding, and prosocial behavior. However, when an empathetic individual becomes entangled with a covert narcissist, this sensitivity is systematically exploited and ultimately corrupted, transforming into a state of painful and exhausting hypervigilance.³⁵

The covert narcissist often presents with an air of vulnerability, sadness, or being misunderstood, appealing directly to the empath's desire to help and connect.⁷ The empath attunes to the narcissist's subtle emotional cues, unspoken needs, and shifting moods, often in an attempt to manage the relationship, avoid conflict, or provide a perceived sense of healing. The narcissist's behaviors, however, are characterized by inconsistency, emotional unavailability, subtle manipulation, gaslighting, and intermittent reinforcement—a pattern that is inherently unpredictable and threatening, despite its covert nature.¹

Over time, the empath's heightened sensitivity, repeatedly met with manipulation, invalidation, or negative consequences, learns to associate subtle interpersonal cues

with potential danger. Post-abuse, this finely tuned "empathic radar" does not simply switch off; instead, it becomes re-calibrated for threat detection.⁴⁵ The individual's ability to keenly perceive emotional nuances, once a tool for connection, morphs into a self-protective mechanism that is constantly "on alert".³⁵ This is not merely generalized anxiety; it is a highly specific, exhausting scanning of others for the very relational dynamics—insincerity, hidden motives, potential for manipulation—that characterized the abuse.⁴⁶ Neutral social cues may be misinterpreted as signs of impending harm, making genuine connection difficult and perpetuating a sense of unease and isolation.⁴⁸ The empath's world, once rich with emotional connection, becomes a landscape mined with potential threats, a direct result of their core sensitivity being turned against them.

3.2. From Self-Blame to Toxic Shame: The Internalization of Worthlessness

A pre-existing tendency towards self-blame, often found in conscientious individuals who readily accept responsibility¹¹, can be catastrophically magnified within a covert narcissistic relationship, culminating in the internalization of toxic shame. Toxic shame is not simply guilt about a specific action; it is a pervasive, deeply ingrained belief that one is fundamentally flawed, defective, worthless, or a mistake.⁶

Covert narcissists are masters of projection, blame-shifting, and subtle devaluation.² They consistently deflect responsibility for their own negative behaviors and the problems within the relationship, often making the victim feel accountable for the narcissist's moods, actions, and unhappiness. The victim, particularly one prone to introspection and self-criticism, begins to internalize these relentless projections as accurate reflections of their own character.⁵ The persistent, often quiet, drip of criticism, disappointment, and insinuation that the victim is inadequate or "too sensitive" erodes their self-worth.

Over time, this repeated experience of being blamed, devalued, and made to feel responsible for the abuser's internal state and the relationship's dysfunction transforms situational self-blame into a pervasive, identity-level conviction of inherent badness.⁶ The victim absorbs the narcissist's disowned negative self-parts—their shame, rage, and inadequacy—and comes to carry these as their own. This toxic shame becomes a core component of the C-PTSD experienced by many survivors.³⁰ It is a profound wound that shapes their entire perception of themselves and their place in the world, making them feel undeserving of love, happiness, or healthy relationships.⁵¹ This internalized worthlessness can perpetuate the trauma by making victims believe they deserved the abuse or are incapable of anything better, thereby hindering recovery and potentially increasing vulnerability to future exploitation. The

anger that might naturally arise in response to mistreatment, if unsafe to express outwardly, can be turned inward, further fueling this self-attacking shame.⁵¹

3.3. From People-Pleasing to Identity Loss: The Erasure of Self

A history of people-pleasing, often an adaptive behavior learned in earlier life experiences to gain approval, avoid conflict, or manage unpredictable environments (such as those involving narcissistic parents or other forms of trauma)¹⁷, can lead to a devastating erosion and eventual loss of self-identity when subjected to the dynamics of a covert narcissistic relationship. People-pleasers typically suppress their own needs, desires, opinions, and feelings to cater to others, fearing rejection or disapproval.⁵³

In a relationship with a covert narcissist, this tendency is relentlessly exploited. The covert narcissist's needs and methods of control are often expressed indirectly, through emotional manipulation, guilt-tripping, playing the victim, passive aggression, or unspoken expectations.¹ The people-pleaser, highly attuned to these subtle cues and desperate to maintain peace, gain approval, or avoid the narcissist's displeasure, constantly contorts themselves to meet these shifting and often insatiable demands.⁵⁷ They become hyper-focused on anticipating and managing the narcissist's emotional state, a task that requires continuous self-suppression.

Over years of this chronic self-negation, the victim becomes profoundly disconnected from their own authentic self.⁵³ Their thoughts, feelings, preferences, and even values are gradually subsumed by the perceived needs and expectations of the abuser. They may no longer know what they genuinely like or dislike, what their personal goals are, or what they believe outside the context of the relationship. This results in a profound loss of identity, where the self becomes a hollow echo, defined entirely by its reflection in the abuser.²¹ The insidious nature of the covert narcissist's control makes this erasure particularly complete, as the demands are often less explicit and more emotionally coercive, leading the people-pleaser down a path of almost imperceptible self-abandonment. Re-discovering or reconstructing a sense of self—identifying personal needs, desires, and opinions—becomes a primary and challenging therapeutic goal post-abuse.

3.4. From a Trusting Nature to Pervasive Distrust: The Shattering of Relational Security

Many individuals enter relationships with an inherently open and trusting nature, often linked to traits like agreeableness or a fundamental belief in the good of others.¹⁰

When this trusting disposition encounters the systematic deceit, manipulation, and betrayal endemic to a relationship with a covert narcissist, the transformation is devastating, leading to a state of pervasive distrust that extends to all areas of life.⁵ This profound distrust becomes a significant barrier to healing, future happiness, and the formation of new, healthy connections.

The covert narcissist, often under the initial guise of love, vulnerability, or deep understanding, exploits the victim's trust in the most intimate ways.⁷ Through tactics like gaslighting, intermittent reinforcement (love bombing followed by devaluation), lying, and emotional manipulation, they systematically violate the foundational principles of a trusting relationship.¹ This betrayal is particularly damaging because it occurs within a context where love and safety are expected, and the abuse itself is often so hidden and confusing that the victim doubts their own perceptions long before they doubt the abuser.

The experience teaches the victim, on a visceral level, that their deepest intuitions about safety, love, and the reliability of others can be profoundly wrong. This shatters not only their trust in others but, crucially, their trust in their *own judgment* and ability to discern safe from unsafe individuals.⁵ This self-distrust then projects outward, creating a pervasive suspicion of others' motives, sincerity, and intentions.³¹ Kindness, compliments, or attempts at intimacy from new people may be met with intense suspicion and fear, as these very behaviors may have been weaponized by the abuser during periods of love-bombing or manipulation. This pervasive distrust is not merely an emotional scar; it represents a fundamental cognitive re-wiring of how the victim perceives relational safety. The world, once approached with openness, becomes a place where threat and deception are anticipated, making it incredibly difficult to form new bonds or even engage with therapeutic support, as the therapist's intentions might initially be questioned.

Table 3: Mapping Pre-Existing Traits to Their Post-Abuse Manifestations in Covert Narcissistic Abuse

Pre-Existing Trait	How Covert Narcissist Exploited/Interacted with Trait	Resultant Post-Abuse Symptom/Transformation	Key Supporting References
Empathy (High capacity to sense)	Covert narcissist feigns	Painful Hypervigilance	⁷ (Empathy); ³⁵

and share others' feelings)	vulnerability/victimhood, eliciting care; victim attunes to abuser's subtle emotional cues and manipulative signals.	(Constant, anxious scanning for subtle signs of insincerity, manipulation, or threat in all interactions).	(Hypervigilance)
Tendency for Self-Blame (Often linked to conscientiousness; inclination to take responsibility)	Covert narcissist consistently projects blame, shifts responsibility, subtly devalues, and criticizes victim for abuser's actions or relationship problems.	Toxic Shame (Pervasive, internalized belief of being fundamentally flawed, defective, worthless, or a mistake; core part of C-PTSD).	¹¹ (Self-blame); ² (Narcissist's tactics); ⁶ (Toxic Shame)
People-Pleasing (Pattern of suppressing own needs/opinions to gain approval, avoid conflict, often from past trauma)	Covert narcissist exerts control through indirect emotional manipulation (guilt, victimhood, passive aggression); victim constantly adapts to unspoken, shifting demands.	Identity Loss/Erasure of Self (Profound disconnection from own needs, desires, opinions, values; victim no longer knows who they are outside the abuser's influence).	¹⁷ (People-pleasing); ¹ (Narcissist's tactics); ²⁸ (Identity Loss)
Trusting Nature (General openness to others; belief in sincerity and good intentions)	Covert narcissist engages in systematic deceit, gaslighting, betrayal, and manipulation within an intimate relationship, often under a guise of love or care.	Pervasive Distrust (Struggle to trust anyone, including oneself; suspicion of others' motives; fear of vulnerability and new relationships; shattered belief in relational safety).	¹⁰ (Trusting nature implied); ¹ (Narcissist's tactics); ⁵ (Pervasive Distrust)

Conclusion: Towards a Holistic Model and Implications

The trajectory of a victim enduring covert narcissistic abuse is a devastating journey of progressive psychological erosion. This multi-dimensional analysis reveals that the process is not one of random victimization but a complex, insidious ensnarement where the abuser's subtle tactics systematically target and exploit the victim's

inherent strengths, personality traits, and learned relational patterns. These attributes, often positive in other contexts, are tragically transformed into sources of profound suffering, leading to complex trauma and a fractured sense of self. The "covert" nature of the abuse is the critical linchpin that enables it to persist, often unrecognized for extended periods, thereby inflicting deep and lasting damage to the victim's identity, relational capacity, physiological health, and overall well-being.²

A holistic model of this trajectory underscores several key dynamics:

1. **The Corruption of Positive Traits:** Qualities such as empathy, conscientiousness, and a trusting nature, along with compassionate tendencies like the "fixer" archetype, are not merely incidental but are actively sought and instrumentalized by the covert narcissist.⁷ These strengths become conduits for manipulation, as the victim's efforts to understand, help, and maintain harmony are met with exploitation and devaluation.
2. **The Primacy of Pre-existing Relational Blueprints:** A history of insecure attachment, codependency, or narcissistic parenting creates a vulnerability, not because the victim desires abuse, but because the early dynamics of the relationship with a covert narcissist (e.g., love-bombing, feigned empathy) can deceptively resonate with unmet needs for validation and connection, or feel tragically familiar.⁷
3. **The Insidious Power of Unawareness:** The lack of public and individual understanding of the specific, subtle tactics of covert narcissism—particularly gaslighting, plausible deniability, and feigned victimhood—is a crucial factor that allows the abuse to flourish in darkness.³ Victims, and often those around them, struggle to identify and name the abuse, leading to prolonged exposure and internalized self-blame.
4. **The Profound Damage to Identity and Reality:** The sustained psychological warfare, especially chronic gaslighting, leads to severe cognitive dissonance and an erosion of the victim's reality, fundamentally damaging their ability to trust their own perceptions and fostering a deep-seated toxic shame.⁵ The development of "narcissistic fleas" further complicates the victim's sense of self, as they reactively adopt behaviors that cause them distress and can be used by the abuser to assign blame.³³
5. **The Transformation into Debilitating Symptoms:** The pre-existing traits, once exploited, are magnified into debilitating post-abuse symptoms. Empathy warps into hypervigilance; self-blame into toxic shame; people-pleasing into identity loss; and a trusting nature into pervasive distrust. This synergy underscores the profound and targeted nature of the psychological damage.

The implications of this holistic understanding are significant. Firstly, there is an urgent need for increased public and professional education on the nuanced dynamics of covert narcissistic abuse, moving beyond stereotypical portrayals of narcissism. Early recognition by individuals of their own vulnerability patterns and by professionals of the subtle signs of this abuse is critical for prevention and intervention. Secondly, therapeutic approaches must be specialized to address the unique sequelae, particularly C-PTSD, the erosion of reality through gaslighting, the reconstruction of a core sense of self, and the painstaking process of rebuilding trust in one's own perceptions and in the possibility of safe relationships. Interventions should validate the victim's experience, help deconstruct the abuser's false narratives, and address the cognitive dissonance that often keeps victims ensnared. Finally, further research is warranted, particularly longitudinal studies tracking victim recovery and the efficacy of different therapeutic modalities tailored to the survivors of this insidious form of psychological violence. Understanding this trajectory in its entirety is the first step towards mitigating its devastating impact and fostering pathways to genuine healing and recovery.

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