

Idealize, Devalue, Discard: The Dizzying Cycle of Narcissism

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The relationship cycle typical of extreme narcissistic abuse generally follows a pattern. Individuals in emotionally abusive relationships experience a dizzying whirlwind that includes three stages: idealization, devaluing, and discarding. This cycle can repeat numerous times, spinning a merry-go-round of emotional vertigo for those caught in such relationships.

In the beginning of a romantic relationship with a person affected by narcissism, an individual may describe the initial infatuation stage as "otherworldly." The emotional high can feel like a drug cocktail as potent as cocaine, heroin, and ecstasy, all rolled into one noxious dose that lasts a few weeks, months, or in some cases a year or slightly more. Targets of narcissistic abuse report feeling as if they have found their soulmate and can't believe their good fortune that this seductive courtesan has elevated them to soaring heights upon a pedestal. "Love bombing" is a phrase describing this stage, in which the narcissistic person may smother the target with praise, courting, intense sex, vacations, promises of a future together, and designation, essentially, as the most special person ever.

Soon the relationship proceeds into a more comfortable rhythm. Perhaps the sex continues at a high intensity or it may begin to wane a bit. Gradually, the target begins to see bright red flags that indicate a problem in this fantastical paradise. The person with narcissism often may begin—subtly, insidiously, and covertly—to devalue his or her significant other. This may happen via putdowns, gaslighting, intermittently lacking emotional or physical intimacy, withdrawing affection, seductive withholding, inexplicably disappearing from contact, or blaming the target for the narcissistic person's issues (projection).

Ultimately, the person with narcissism discards his or her dating partner, who served as a source of narcissistic supply to fuel the ego of the individual with narcissistic issues. When the target asks for compromise, reciprocity, empathy, integrity, honesty, and boundaries (all healthy and valid requests that people with extreme narcissistic qualities generally do not engage in), the person with narcissism may decide that the target has lost his or her luster and is tarnished—no longer the "perfect partner" to fluff the ego feathers. Inevitably, the discarding occurs when the person with narcissism either disappears or orchestrates his or her own abandonment by engaging in some form of egregious emotional abuse. The outcome is often shocking for the survivor, unclear as to how someone that he or she fell so deeply in love with could throw it all away.

In most cases, survivors of narcissism were able to offer empathy, compassion, authenticity, honesty, reciprocity, and compromise during the relationship. People with narcissistic tendencies are drawn to such empathic, deeply feeling people and know that, on some level, they personally are lacking in emotional depth and substance. By being in a relationship with such a nurturing, loving person, the person with narcissism is able to consume that person's authentic love and extract narcissistic supply. Once fed over the course of days, weeks, or months, the person with narcissism is satiated and may grow bored with his or her partner. He or she must secure the supply of another target, usually in short order.

Survivors can heal and move forward with the help of psychotherapy and support in narrating their story and resolving the trauma of emotional abuse. Understanding the dynamics of abuse empowers survivors to lessen any cognitive dissonance remaining as a result of gaslighting and other emotional abuse. Armed with knowledge, survivors understand the relationship cycle they endured and can move forward with enough protective armor such that they can jump off the merry-go-round of emotional abuse and be just fine.