



# The Psychological Effects of Relationships with Individuals Having Narcissistic Personality Disorder on Victims

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Corresponding author:	<b>Abstract</b>
*Abdulkadir Kayaalp <a href="mailto:abdulkadirkayaalp46@gmail.com">abdulkadirkayaalp46@gmail.com</a>	<b>Background:</b> Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is characterized by excessive self-admiration, a need for validation, and a lack of empathy, often leading to emotionally harmful relationship patterns. <b>Objective:</b> This study aims to explore the psychological effects experienced by individuals who have been in romantic relationships with partners diagnosed with NPD. <b>Method:</b> A qualitative approach was adopted using purposive sampling to select participants who had been in long-term relationships with NPD individuals. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and thematically analyzed. <b>Results:</b> Findings indicate that NPD partners typically begin relationships with intense idealization, which gradually shifts to criticism, manipulation, and emotional abuse. Participants reported emotional exhaustion, diminished self-worth, and symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress. <b>Conclusion:</b> The study emphasizes the lasting psychological damage caused by such relationships, the need for strong social support systems during recovery, and the importance of raising awareness and providing psychological interventions. Further empirical research is encouraged to develop coping strategies and support mechanisms.
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## Abstrak

**Latar Belakang:** Gangguan Kepribadian Narsistik (NPD) ditandai dengan kekaguman diri yang berlebihan, kebutuhan akan validasi, dan kurangnya empati, yang seringkali mengarah pada pola hubungan yang merugikan secara emosional. **Tujuan:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dampak psikologis yang dialami individu yang pernah menjalin hubungan romantis dengan pasangan yang didiagnosis NPD. **Metode:** Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan dengan teknik purposive sampling untuk memilih partisipan yang pernah memiliki hubungan jangka panjang dengan individu NPD. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan dianalisis secara tematik. **Hasil:** Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pasangan dengan NPD biasanya memulai hubungan dengan idealisasi berlebihan yang kemudian berubah menjadi kritik, manipulasi, dan kekerasan emosional. Partisipan melaporkan kelelahan emosional, penurunan harga diri, dan gejala mirip stres pascatrauma. **Kesimpulan:** Studi ini menyoroti kerusakan psikologis jangka panjang akibat hubungan tersebut, pentingnya dukungan sosial selama pemulihan, serta perlunya intervensi psikologis dan peningkatan kesadaran masyarakat. Penelitian lanjutan dianjurkan untuk mengembangkan strategi coping dan sistem dukungan yang efektif.

**Kata Kunci:** Efek psikologis; gangguan kepribadian narsistik; hubungan romantis; korban narsistik; manipulasi emosional

## Introduction

Narcissism is a concept that is rooted in Greek mythology. According to the myth, Narcissus falls in love with his reflection in the water and, in an attempt to embrace it, falls in and drowns (Ekşi & Demirci, 2017; Zeigler-Hill & Trombly, 2018). Numerous definitions of narcissism have been proposed in the literature (Ellis, 1898; Özçetin et al., 2008; Rozenblatt, 2002; Freud, 1914; Bursten, 1973). The first to introduce the concept of narcissism, Ellis (1898), defined it as admiration of oneself, particularly prevalent in women (Karaaziz & Erdem Atak, 2013). According to Freud (1914), it is characterised by an orientation towards one's own self. Horney (1939) offered another definition, describing it as a form of self-alienation. Additionally, Rozenblatt (2002) defined it as the persona individuals adopt to protect themselves from perceived threats. A more comprehensive definition is as follows: narcissism can be defined as the excessive admiration and self-love individuals feel towards themselves. It is a complex personality trait characterised by an inflated sense of self-importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, and a lack of empathy towards others (Miller et al., 2011). It encompasses a range of behaviours and attitudes that reflect a preoccupation with oneself and an overwhelming desire for others' approval (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Individuals exhibiting narcissistic traits often show tendencies towards grandiosity, authority, and using interpersonal relationships for personal gain (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The manifestation of narcissism can vary greatly among individuals, but its core characteristics remain consistent, leading to significant consequences for both the individuals themselves and those around them.

The emergence of narcissism has prompted theorists to propose various ideas about its origins. The development of narcissistic traits can be linked to a combination of genetic, environmental, and psychological factors (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Research indicates that childhood experiences, such as excessive pampering or neglect, play a critical role in shaping narcissistic behaviours (Kohut, 1971; Korkmaz, 2023). Furthermore, societal influences, including a cultural emphasis on individualism and success, may contribute to the prevalence of narcissistic tendencies in certain populations (Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Korkmaz, 2023). Understanding these underlying causes is essential for grasping the complexities of narcissism and its impact on individuals' psychological development and interpersonal relationships.

Narcissism can significantly affect romantic relationships, often leading to unhealthy dynamics (Campbell et al., 2005; Sen & Bariskin, 2019). Narcissistic individuals may struggle to form genuine emotional connections due to their self-centredness, which impairs their ability to empathise with and respond to their partners' needs (Miller et al., 2011; Sen & Bariskin, 2019). Consequently, victims of narcissists may experience feelings of inadequacy, emotional distress, and a diminished sense of self-worth as a result of the narcissist's behaviour (Campbell & Foster, 2002). The relational challenges posed by narcissism can create a cycle of emotional turmoil that ultimately undermines the stability and satisfaction of romantic partnerships. Victims of narcissistic individuals often face significant psychological, emotional, and social repercussions (Holt et al., 2017; Korkmaz, 2022). Research suggests that those in close relationships with narcissists may experience anxiety, depression, and a decline in self-esteem due to narcissists' manipulative and exploitative behaviours (Miller et al., 2011; Çelik et al., 2021). Additionally, the emotional turmoil and instability stemming from such relationships can lead to long-term psychological effects, including post-traumatic stress symptoms (Holt et al., 2017; Nurkan, 2020). Overall, the negative impact of being in a relationship with a narcissistic partner can be profound and lasting, underscoring the importance of recognizing and addressing the consequences of narcissistic dynamics in close relationships.

This study aimed to examine the psychological effects of relationships with individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) on their victims. This study seeks to understand the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of such relationships, as well as their long-term effects on the mental health and well-being of victims. In this context, evaluating the destructive effects of narcissistic relationships on individuals' psychological integrity will make a significant contribution.

## Method

This study employed a qualitative research method to investigate the psychological effects of relationships with individuals diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) on their victims. The research involved conducting in-depth interviews to gather data based on the participants' personal experiences and observations. The tendency of individuals with narcissistic personality disorder to assume the victim role in their relationships and the effects of this behaviour on victims are of significant importance in the literature (Casabianca & Pedersen, 2020).

## Participant

The study included participants who had previously been in a relationship with individuals diagnosed with NPD. Participants were selected from various age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds of the participants. The sample was determined using a purposive sampling method, considering the nature and duration of the relationships experienced by the participants, in line with the study objectives. Additionally, the data obtained from these individuals were supported by the literature. The tendency of individuals with narcissistic personality disorder to manipulate others and assume the victim role forms the basis for this study (Silva Casabianca & Pedersen, 2020).

Ethical principles will be considered throughout the research. Informed consent will be obtained from the participants prior to the interviews, and their anonymity will be protected. Participants will also be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. This approach provides an in-depth perspective on the effects of relationships with individuals diagnosed with NPD on their victims. The findings aim to make significant contributions to the existing literature in this field.

## Data Measurement

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, participants were asked questions under the following main headings.

1. Beginning of the Relationship: Questions about how participants met their narcissistic partners and their initial impressions of them.
2. Development of the Relationship: Changes, conflicts, and alterations in partner behaviour during the progression of the relationship.
3. Ending of the Relationship: Observations regarding the separation process and the emotional challenges experienced by the children.
4. Recovery Process: Recovery methods pursued and support-seeking behaviours following separation.
5. Emotional and Psychological Effects: Emotional difficulties and psychological impacts experienced during the relationship.
6. Tendencies for Infidelity: Noticed behaviours indicating infidelity.

The interviews aimed to delve deeply into the participants' experiences by utilising open-ended questions, scaled responses, and experiential enquiries. These questions aimed to provide detailed information about the specific behaviours and observations the participants encountered in their relationships with narcissistic individuals.

## Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis enables the identification of the main themes that emerge in participants' responses and establishes relationships between these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the initial phase, the interviews were scaled using scaling methods. Subsequently, the questions posed to the participants were chosen based on experiences and observations that were deemed appropriate on the scale.

To enhance the reliability of the study, a small pilot study was conducted prior to the interviews. In the pilot study, the interview questions will be tested and necessary revisions will be made. For validity, a triangulation method was employed to compare the data obtained from different participants (Creswell, 2014).

## Result

In the results section of the study, findings obtained from interviews with participants will be presented. The findings will be examined in six stages based on the literature and interviews: the beginning, development, and ending of the relationship; the recovery process; emotional and psychological effects; and infidelity.

### The Beginning of the Relationship

At the beginning of the relationship, nearly all participants expressed that they found their partners to be extremely attractive, understanding, and attentive. This stage can be described as a typical reflection of the process known in the literature as the "idealisation phase" of individuals with narcissistic personality disorder (Karandashev, 2019). Participants stated that their partners made them feel special during this period through constant compliments, gift exchanges, and surprises, leading to rapid emotional attachment. It was understood that partners made efforts to establish emotional closeness, but these efforts were not sustained.

Specifically, while partners appeared to be empathetic, these behaviours were later revealed to be merely manipulative. Participants emphasised that their partners always tried to create the impression of being

the "right person" during this phase, behaving like ideal spouses or lovers. These behaviours were evaluated as conscious strategies to conceal their true selves and ensure the other party's emotional investment. However, some participants mentioned that despite noticing their partners' inconsistent behaviours during this period, they ignored these signals due to the intense emotional bond at the beginning of the relationship.

Participants expressed that they felt a strong sense of support and trust in the relationship's early stages. When evaluated from the perspective of attachment theory, the behaviours exhibited by partners facilitated the emotional bonding of the other party and positioned the partner as an "indispensable" figure. However, this phase was short-lived, and partners began to exhibit critical, controlling, and distant attitudes over time. This situation reflects the typical behavioural pattern of individuals with narcissistic personality disorder, where the initial idealisation process is replaced by the "devaluation" phase (Morrison & Stolorow, 2014; Funk, 2019).

### ***The Development of the Relationship***

In the later stages of the relationship, participants observed a significant change in their partners' behaviours. This change manifested as a shift from idealised attitudes at the beginning of the relationship to critical, dismissive, and controlling behaviours. Participants noted that their partners constantly blamed them for problems in the relationship, ignored their own faults, and frequently resorted to emotional manipulation.

The vast majority of participants stated that their partners' lack of empathy was one of the biggest issues in their relationships. By ignoring the emotional needs of the other person and continuously prioritising their own desires, partners destabilised relationship dynamics. This situation reflects the fundamental characteristics of individuals with narcissistic personality disorder, such as "self-centeredness" and "need for control" (Alvarez segura, 2015; Ronningstam, 2017; Forsyth et al., 2012; Costin, 2020). Participants emphasised that their partners constantly criticised them and used belittling expressions, which led to a significant decrease in their self-esteem. Manipulative behaviours, referred to as "gaslighting", are frequently observed during this process (Mento et al., 2023; Abramson, 2014). Participants stated that their partners distorted reality, forcing them to question themselves, and that this situation led to long-term psychological wear and tear. Additionally, partners tended to avoid conflicts, opting to bypass issues with silence or outbursts of anger. Such behaviours make it impossible to establish healthy communication in a relationship.

### **The Ending of the Relationship**

The process of ending a relationship has generally been a period filled with intense emotional turmoil for participants. They noted that during the separation process, their partners continuously shifted the blame onto them instead of taking responsibility, making the decision to end the relationship even more difficult. The separation process progressed slowly and painfully, and participants had to cope with feelings of loneliness, loss of self-esteem, and indecision during this time.

Some participants mentioned that their partners attempted to "rekindle" the relationship after the separation, but these efforts were described as manipulative and insincere attempts. The partners' attempts to restart the relationship while ignoring past issues presented a behavioural pattern consistent with the "reconquest" strategies typically exhibited by individuals with narcissistic personality traits (Akiş & Öztürk, 2021).

### **Recovery Process**

The process of exiting the relationship and recovering was both challenging and instructive for the participants. They have worked to make sense of their past relationship experiences and focused on rebuilding themselves by learning from the trauma they experienced. In particular, participants who received professional counselling stated that they were better able to understand the effects of their narcissistic partners' behaviours, and this understanding contributed to their recovery process. When evaluated within the framework of post-traumatic growth theory, most participants expressed that they had developed a more resilient identity during this process. Social support mechanisms emerged as an important resource in the participants' recovery process. Emotional support from family and friends helped participants feel more secure and reassured them that they were not alone in the recovery process. Furthermore, participants' increased self-awareness and redefinition of personal boundaries allowed them to establish healthier relationships in the future.

### **Emotional and Psychological Effects**

The emotional and psychological effects of relationships with individuals with narcissistic personality disorder left deep scars on the participants. Partners' dismissive, critical, and lack of empathy attitudes damaged participants' self-perception and led to a serious decline in their self-esteem. Participants expressed that they were constantly trying to please their partners, which resulted in emotional exhaustion. Manipulation, especially through "gaslighting", caused distortions in the participants' perceptions of reality. This situation



weakened individuals' connections not only with their partners but also with their inner world. Emotional abuse and psychological wear and tear negatively impacted participants' long-term mental health and complicated the recovery process.

### **Infidelity**

Infidelity has emerged as a common theme in relationships with narcissistic individuals (Hunyady, 2008; Ataman & Yalçinkaya, 2024; Wurst et al., 2017). According to the participants, the unfaithful behaviours of narcissistic individuals often led to both the end of the relationship and deep emotional wounds. Participants noted that when they became aware of their partners' unfaithful behaviours, it signified not only physical betrayal but also the destruction of trust and commitment. This undermined the foundations of the relationship and often created an irreversible breaking point.

After noticing infidelity, partners refused to take responsibility, redirected blame onto the participants, and often denied the situation. Such behaviours were evaluated as part of strategies consistent with narcissistic personality traits, manipulating the truth, and making the other party feel guilty. Participants emphasised that the disappointment they experienced during this process negatively affected not only their relationships but also their self-esteem and their relationships with others. It was understood that the trauma caused by infidelity had a longer-lasting and more challenging impact on the recovery process.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to understand the psychological and emotional effects of relationships with individuals with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). The findings demonstrate that such relationships leave multifaceted and profound imprints on the victims. These results align with the existing literature, revealing the impact of narcissistic partners on relationship dynamics and the traumatic consequences of these effects on victims (Karşı & Anlı, 2010; Bachar et al., 2005; Cohen, 1981). In the discussion section, each finding is addressed in relation to the literature, and recommendations for future research are presented.

At the beginning of the relationship, the idealisation behaviours exhibited by narcissistic individuals led victims to bond quickly with their partners. The intense interest and support shown by partners seem to strengthen victims' feelings of trust and attachment. However, it has been observed that these behaviors are part of a manipulative strategy and that narcissistic individuals tend to conceal their true selves (Buss et al., 1987). This situation has been associated in the literature with the "idealisation and devaluation" cycle of narcissistic individuals (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Wuhrmann, 1999). The positive dynamics experienced during the initial phase of the relationship increased the victims' hopes for the relationship but ultimately led to significant disappointment.

In the later stages of the relationship, the lack of empathy, controlling behaviours, and critical attitudes of narcissistic partners hindered the healthy progression of the relationship. Manipulative methods, particularly "gaslighting", cause victims to question their self-perception and experience psychological erosion. The literature notes that narcissistic individuals exhibit behaviours that increase power imbalances in relationships, leading to a loss of self-esteem among the victims (Miller et al., 2010; Zadeh, 2017). Power imbalance in such relationships often manifests through domination, emotional invalidation, and decision-making control, resulting in one partner consistently holding more influence over the relationship dynamic. According to Babcock and Graham (1997), emotional abuse and manipulation contribute significantly to establishing and maintaining power asymmetries in romantic relationships. This imbalance not only limits the victim's autonomy but also reinforces dependency, making it harder to exit the relationship. Similarly, Dixon and Graham-Kevan (2011) emphasise that coercive control tactics used by abusive individuals erode the victim's sense of agency and identity over time. The findings of this study are consistent with these perspectives, indicating that manipulative and controlling behaviours in narcissistic relationships play a critical role in the emotional exhaustion and psychological disempowerment of victims of narcissistic abuse.

The separation process is an extremely challenging emotional period for victims due to narcissistic partners' avoidance of responsibility and their continued manipulative behaviours (Ring, 2024). It appears that partners' attempts at "reconnection" after separation complicated the victims' healing process. The literature suggests that such behaviours are related to narcissistic individuals' efforts to maintain control (Ronningstam, 2005; Ertürk & Eray, 2016; Aydın & Yavuzer, 2022). The critical importance of social support mechanisms during the separation process emerged as a significant finding of this study. Support from family, friends, and therapists contributed to the victims' emotional recovery.

The healing process is a period in which victims focus on rebuilding themselves and trying to make sense of the trauma caused by the narcissistic relationship. The theory of post-traumatic growth provides an appropriate framework for understanding this process (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Haselden, 2014; Altinsoy

2020). Victims who redefined their personal boundaries and rebuilt their self-esteem expressed that they could establish healthier relationship dynamics in the future. This finding indicates that individuals emerging from narcissistic relationships can undergo a robust recovery process with appropriate support.

The emotional and psychological effects of narcissistic relationships on victims were among the most striking findings of this study. Victims stated that their partners' dismissive and critical attitudes caused serious declines in their self-esteem. Manipulation and behaviours such as “gaslighting distort victims' perception of reality and lead to emotional exhaustion (Sengkey & Illahibaccus-Sona, 2024). These findings illustrate that narcissistic relationships have long-term effects on victims, not only during the relationship process but also after its conclusion. The literature has extensively addressed the repercussions of narcissistic abuse (Durvasula, 2015; Wurst et al., 2017; Foster & Brunell, 2018).

Infidelity emerged as a recurring theme in narcissistic relationships in this study. Participants indicated that infidelity not only undermined the foundation of trust in the relationship but also deeply shook their self-esteem. The refusal of partners to take responsibility after infidelity and their continued manipulative behaviours further complicate the victims' healing process. The literature notes that tendencies toward infidelity are often linked to narcissistic individuals' attempts to control relationship dynamics (Ronningstam, 2005; Exline et al., 2004; Iğdırlı, 2023; Büyük & Cicerali, 2021; Korkmaz, 2022; Elaad et al., 2020).

In this context, this study provides significant data for a deeper understanding of the effects of infidelity in narcissistic relationships. The findings demonstrate that infidelity not only undermines the trust foundation of the relationship but also severely damages victims' self-perception and self-esteem. Participants mentioned that they often recognised their partners' disloyal behaviours late, which further deepened the trauma caused by infidelity. It was expressed that narcissistic individuals frequently shifted the blame onto their victims or denied their behaviours instead of taking responsibility after being unfaithful. These behaviors align with the characteristic defense mechanisms of narcissistic individuals (Exline et al., 2004; Korkmaz, 2022).

The partners' use of “gaslighting” and other manipulative methods during this period led victims to question themselves and experience the effects of infidelity more intensely. The emotional effects of infidelity persisted not only during the relationship process but also after its conclusion. Participants reported experiencing intense loss of trust and disappointment after infidelity, which affected not only their romantic relationships but also their connections with others in general. This situation demonstrates that infidelity in narcissistic relationships can have long-term negative effects on an individual's overall social life.

This study reveals that infidelity in narcissistic relationships is not only an interpersonal issue but also a process that tests the victims' psychological resilience. In overcoming the trauma caused by infidelity, it is crucial for victims to focus on their healing processes rather than taking responsibility for their narcissistic partners' behaviours. During this process, individuals' reconstruction of their self-esteem and learning to set firmer boundaries in future relationships is frequently emphasised as a recovery strategy in the literature (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

## Conclusion

The findings of this study illustrate the deeply destructive nature of relationships with individuals with narcissistic personality disorder. Emotional manipulation, lack of empathy, controlling behaviours, and infidelity are recurring elements that severely affect victims' psychological well-being, both during and after the relationship. The study revealed that the process of separation and recovery requires strong support systems and conscious efforts to rebuild self-worth.

By shedding light on victims' experiences, this study contributes valuable insights into the dynamics of narcissistic relationships and their consequences. It also highlights the necessity of psychological interventions and support mechanisms tailored to victims of such abuse. Future research should explore how narcissistic relationship patterns manifest in different social contexts (e.g. work life, family relations) and examine the long-term effectiveness of such intervention strategies. Overall, this study offers a foundational resource for academics and practitioners aiming to better understand, support, and empower individuals recovering from narcissistic relationships.

Reducing the psychological and emotional effects on victims in relationships with individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and supporting their recovery processes is an important issue that must be addressed at both individual and societal levels. In light of the findings and discussion sections, various ways can be proposed to empower victims and facilitate healthy recovery.

First, raising awareness of the effects of being in a relationship with a narcissistic partner is crucial. Understanding healthy relationship dynamics, being able to identify narcissistic behaviours, and learning ways to exit such relationships can help victims protect themselves before they are harmed. Social awareness

campaigns, informative media content, and educational programs can facilitate a broader understanding of narcissistic abuse. Implementing programs in schools that develop young people's skills for establishing healthy relationships will enable them to recognise emotional manipulation by narcissistic individuals at an early stage. Strengthening social support mechanisms is also necessary to support victims during their recovery. Research findings show that support from family and friends is critically important for individuals emerging from such relationships. Feeling that they are not alone can help victims interpret their traumas in a healthier way and regain their self-esteem.

Establishing community-based support groups can allow individuals with similar experiences to come together and foster solidarity among them. Such groups can create a strong source of motivation during the recovery process and enable individuals to learn from each other. Psychological counselling and therapeutic interventions play vital roles in coping with the effects of narcissistic abuse. Trauma-focused therapies can assist individuals in freeing themselves from the psychological burdens created by narcissistic partners and regaining their strength. Methods such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can help individuals reconstruct the negative beliefs instilled by their narcissistic partners. Professional support can help victims rebuild their self-perception and establish healthy boundaries.

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