The Narcissistic Abuse Glossary

Understanding the patterns. Understanding your experience.
Finding your way forward.

Introduction: When You Don't Have the Words for What's Happening

It's two o'clock in the morning. You're searching the internet because something about your relationship, your experience or even your own behaviour doesn't make sense anymore.

Perhaps you're asking yourself:

• Why do I feel like I'm losing my mind?

• Why am I constantly questioning myself?

• Why do I feel guilty when I haven't done anything wrong?

• Why am I always walking on eggshells?

• Why do I keep going back to someone who hurts me?

• Why can't I move on, even though the relationship is over?

• Why do I feel exhausted all the time?

• Why don't I feel like myself anymore?

• Why do I keep making excuses for someone's behaviour?

• Am I the narcissist?

• What is narcissistic abuse, and how do I know if I've experienced it?

If any of these questions sound familiar, you're not alone in looking for answers.

One of the difficulties of experiencing a confusing or psychologically harmful relationship is that you may not have the language to describe what's happening. You experience individual incidents, conversations, arguments, emotional shifts and patterns of behaviour, but you don't necessarily recognize how they connect.

You might know that something feels wrong without being able to explain why. You might recognize that you're changing, becoming more anxious, questioning your judgment or constantly trying to keep the peace, without understanding what is contributing to those changes.

And when you finally begin searching for answers, you may discover terminology you've never encountered before: gaslighting, projection, triangulation, trauma bonding, intermittent reinforcement, devaluation, hoovering and fawning.

These terms describe different behaviours, relationship dynamics and psychological responses. Understanding them can provide a framework for making sense of experiences that previously felt disconnected or impossible to explain.

Why We Created This Glossary

The Loose Gravel glossary brings together terminology relating to narcissistic traits, narcissistic relationship dynamics, psychological manipulation, trauma responses and recovery.

It is intended to be an accessible educational resource for people who want to understand what they've experienced and explore what might help them move forward.

You don't need to know the terminology before arriving here. You don't need to understand everything in one sitting. You can start with the question that brought you here and follow the information wherever it takes you.

Some terminology in this glossary comes from established psychological research and clinical practice. Other terms are commonly used in discussions about narcissistic abuse and difficult relationship dynamics. We'll distinguish between these where appropriate.

This glossary is not intended to diagnose another person or determine whether a particular relationship meets the criteria for a personality disorder. It is an educational resource to help you understand behaviours, patterns and their possible effects.

Understanding Is a Beginning

Learning what something is called can change how you understand an experience. It can help you recognize patterns, find relevant information, identify questions to explore and discover resources that may support your next steps.

But this resource isn't just about understanding what happened. It's also about what happens next.

There is information about boundaries, self-trust, people-pleasing, trauma responses, nervous-system regulation, recovery and rebuilding everyday capacity.

Because the objective isn't to spend the rest of your life studying the experience. It's to help you find your footing, understand your options and get back to living.

You deserve access to information that helps you understand your experience. And there is life beyond survival.

Part One: Understanding Narcissism and Relationship Dynamics

Narcissism

A personality pattern involving characteristics such as grandiosity, entitlement, a need for admiration and difficulties with empathy. Narcissistic traits exist on a spectrum. Having some narcissistic traits does not automatically mean someone has Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)

A diagnosable personality disorder characterized by a persistent pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration and impaired empathy. Diagnosis requires assessment by a qualified mental health professional.

Narcissistic Traits

Characteristics associated with narcissism that may appear to varying degrees in individuals. Traits alone do not establish a personality disorder.

Narcissistic Abuse

A commonly used term describing patterns of emotionally or psychologically harmful behaviour associated with narcissistic traits or dynamics. It is not itself a formal clinical diagnosis.

Idealization

A relationship phase in which someone is treated as exceptionally special, admired or seemingly perfect. In some harmful relationship dynamics, idealization can contribute to rapid emotional attachment.

Love Bombing

Overwhelming someone with attention, affection, praise, promises or gestures of commitment, particularly early in a relationship. It can be used to accelerate attachment and influence another person's boundaries.

Devaluation

A pattern in which someone who was previously idealized begins receiving criticism, contempt, rejection or diminishing affection.

Discard

A commonly used term for the abrupt rejection or ending of a relationship, often after a period of devaluation.

Reverse Discard

A term used in popular discussions of narcissistic abuse when someone is pushed toward ending a relationship through sustained rejection, conflict or mistreatment, rather than the other person ending it directly.

Hoovering

Attempts to re-establish contact or draw someone back into a relationship after separation. This may involve apologies, promises, affection, guilt or references to shared history.

Breadcrumbing

Providing occasional attention, affection or communication without offering consistent commitment. It can keep someone emotionally invested while the relationship remains uncertain.

Future Faking

Making promises about a future together without a genuine intention or consistent effort to fulfil them.

Fantasy Bond

A concept associated with psychologist Robert Firestone describing an imagined sense of connection that can substitute for genuine emotional intimacy.

Triangulation

Introducing a third person into a relationship dynamic to create comparison, competition, insecurity or influence.

Projection

Attributing one's own unwanted feelings, thoughts or behaviours to someone else.

Gaslighting

A form of psychological manipulation that causes someone to question their memory, perception or understanding of events. It can involve denial, distortion, contradiction and repeated undermining of another person's confidence in their own judgment.

Blame Shifting

Redirecting responsibility for one's actions onto another person rather than acknowledging one's own behaviour.

Smear Campaign

A pattern of spreading damaging or misleading information about someone, potentially affecting their reputation and relationships with others.

Flying Monkeys

A popular term for people who become involved in supporting, defending or carrying out another person's pressure or manipulation against someone else. The term is informal and should not be used to assume that everyone involved understands the situation.

New Supply and Old Supply

Popular terminology used in narcissistic abuse discussions to describe new and former sources of attention, admiration, validation or other perceived benefits. These are informal concepts, not clinical classifications.

Narcissistic Injury

A term used to describe an experience of perceived humiliation, rejection or threat to self-esteem in someone with narcissistic vulnerabilities or traits. Responses can vary considerably.

Narcissistic Mask

An informal expression describing the presentation someone uses to manage how others perceive them, which may differ from their behaviour in private.

Shame-Pride Cycle

An informal framework describing shifts between feelings of shame or inadequacy and defensive expressions of superiority, entitlement or grandiosity. It is not a standalone clinical diagnosis.

Toxic Shame

A persistent sense of being fundamentally defective, unworthy or bad, rather than recognizing that a particular action or experience may have been painful or mistaken.

Part Two: Understanding What Happens to You

Walking on Eggshells

A state of constantly monitoring another person's mood, words and reactions to avoid conflict, criticism or emotional consequences.

Narcissistic Fog

An informal term describing the confusion, self-doubt and difficulty thinking clearly that some people experience within psychologically harmful relationship dynamics.

Trauma Bonding

A strong emotional attachment that can develop within a relationship involving cycles of harm, intermittent affection, power imbalance and reconciliation. It can make separation emotionally difficult.

Betrayal Trauma

Psychological distress associated with betrayal by someone on whom a person depends or whom they deeply trust.

Self-Betrayal

Overriding your own needs, values, instincts or boundaries to maintain a relationship, avoid conflict or accommodate someone else. Self-betrayal can develop gradually and may be connected to learned people-pleasing behaviours, fear of rejection or difficulty asserting personal boundaries.

People-Pleasing

A pattern of prioritizing other people's approval, comfort or expectations over your own needs and preferences. It can involve difficulty saying no, excessive accommodation and fear of disappointing others.

Fawning

A trauma-response term describing attempts to manage perceived threat through appeasement, compliance or pleasing another person. Fawning can overlap with people-pleasing, but the concepts are not identical.

Dissociation

A disruption in the usual integration of awareness, memory, identity, emotion or perception. Experiences can range from feeling detached or unreal to more significant disruptions.

Chronic Stress

Prolonged activation of the body's stress-response systems. Ongoing stress can affect sleep, concentration, mood, physical health and everyday functioning.

Complex PTSD (C-PTSD)

A condition recognized in the ICD-eleven involving the core symptoms of PTSD alongside difficulties with emotional regulation, self-concept and relationships, often following prolonged or repeated traumatic experiences.

Dysregulation

Difficulty maintaining or returning to a manageable emotional and physiological state. It may involve heightened alertness, anxiety, shutdown, irritability or difficulty settling.

Survival Mode

An informal expression describing a prolonged state of prioritizing safety and immediate demands over exploration, creativity, growth and ordinary life activities.

Fight, Flight, Freeze and Fawn

Commonly discussed responses to perceived threat. Fight involves confronting or resisting a threat. Flight involves escaping or avoiding it. Freeze involves becoming immobilized or unable to respond effectively. Fawn involves appeasing or accommodating to reduce perceived danger. These responses are not character flaws.

Neglect

A failure to provide appropriate emotional or practical care. Emotional neglect may involve consistently dismissing, ignoring or failing to respond to someone's emotional needs.

Advanced Trauma

A phrase sometimes used informally to describe significant or accumulated trauma effects. It is not a standardized clinical diagnosis. More specific terminology, such as complex trauma or chronic traumatic stress, may be more useful.

Part Three: Protecting Yourself and Exiting

Boundaries

Personal limits that define what behaviour you will accept, what you are comfortable with and what actions you will take to protect your well-being.

Boundary Erosion

The gradual weakening or repeated violation of personal boundaries, potentially making it increasingly difficult to recognize or enforce one's limits.

Exit Strategy

A plan for leaving a relationship or environment while considering practical, emotional, financial and physical safety.

No Contact

A decision to discontinue communication with someone. It may be used to establish distance, protect boundaries and support recovery. In situations involving safety, legal or shared-care responsibilities, appropriate planning may be necessary.

Grey Rock

An informal strategy of keeping interactions brief, neutral and emotionally unengaging when contact cannot be avoided. It is not appropriate or safe in every situation.

Moving in Silence

An informal expression describing keeping personal plans, decisions or preparations private, particularly when disclosure could lead to interference or pressure.

Season of Isolation

A commonly used expression describing a period of reduced social contact. It is important to distinguish intentional restorative solitude from harmful isolation or withdrawal from supportive relationships.

Cycle Breaker

A term describing someone who recognizes and works to interrupt repeated harmful patterns, including patterns learned through family relationships or previous experiences.

Part Four: Understanding Recovery

Awareness

Recognizing thoughts, feelings, behaviours and patterns that may previously have gone unnoticed.

Clarity

Developing a more coherent understanding of experiences, circumstances and personal needs.

Grounding

Practices that help bring attention back to the present moment and support a sense of stability.

Regulation

The ability to manage emotional and physiological responses and return toward a manageable state following stress or activation.

Pause

Creating space between a trigger and a response, allowing time to assess what is happening before deciding how to act.

Recalibration

An informal term for gradually adjusting expectations, habits, routines and responses as circumstances change.

Alignment

Making choices that are more consistent with personal values, needs and boundaries.

Integration

The process of incorporating difficult experiences into a broader understanding of oneself and one's life, rather than allowing those experiences to define everything.

Acceptance

Acknowledging what has happened without requiring approval of it or abandoning the possibility of change.

Self-Forgiveness

Developing compassion toward yourself for decisions, responses or circumstances that you now understand differently.

Capacity

The emotional, physical and practical resources available to manage everyday demands. Capacity can fluctuate and may increase as stability, support and recovery develop.

Dark Night of the Soul

A spiritual expression describing a period of profound inner difficulty, questioning or transformation. It is not a clinical diagnosis and may have different meanings across spiritual traditions.

Part Five: Life After Survival

Recovery

An ongoing process of restoring well-being, developing coping resources, rebuilding relationships with oneself and others, and returning to meaningful activities.

Healing

A broad term describing the process of responding to emotional, psychological or physical difficulties and developing greater well-being.

Growth

Developing new skills, perspectives, confidence and capacity through learning and experience.

Change

The process of developing different responses, behaviours, routines or ways of relating to oneself and others.

Love

A relationship involving care, respect, consideration, emotional safety and mutual regard. Healthy love does not require abandoning personal identity or boundaries.

Faith

A personal or spiritual framework that may provide meaning, connection, hope and support during difficult experiences.

Joy

The capacity to experience pleasure, interest, connection and satisfaction in everyday life, including ordinary activities and small moments.

Authenticity

Living in a way that is more consistent with one's genuine values, identity, preferences and beliefs.

Peace

A sense of relative safety, stability and freedom from ongoing conflict or excessive internal distress.

The In-Between

An informal expression describing the transitional period between leaving an old situation and feeling established in a new way of living. It can involve uncertainty, adjustment, learning and gradual rebuilding.

Where Do You Begin?

You don't have to work through this glossary from beginning to end.

Start with the question that brought you here.

If you're questioning your memory or perception, explore gaslighting.

If you feel unable to leave a relationship despite repeated harm, explore trauma bonding.

If you constantly accommodate others at your own expense, explore people-pleasing, fawning and self-betrayal.

If you're struggling after leaving a difficult relationship, explore chronic stress, dysregulation, grounding and regulation.

If you're beginning to feel more stable, explore capacity, integration, growth and authenticity.

Take your time. Read what is useful. Make notes. Look for connections. Seek appropriate professional support when you need it.

You are allowed to learn at your own pace.

> **Understanding what happened is one part of the journey. Discovering what comes next is another.**

You deserve the opportunity to build a life that is bigger than what you survived.

Welcome to Life After Survival.
Loose Gravel — A place to get your footing.