

A divorce pitfall: Covert or overt narcissists hiding in plain sight

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Divorce can be difficult -- for those going through it and for their attorneys. Financial concerns, crowded dockets, as well as the personalities of vying litigators and litigants can serve to contribute to the burdens attendant to achieving an accord and finalizing the case. Covert narcissists have ways of hiding in plain sight, and those character traits can influence the flow of the case. We need to know what we are looking for, and how to best present communications in a way to push the case toward resolution.

What is a narcissistic personality disorder? The [DSM-V](#) addresses [narcissistic personality disorder](#) as “a pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy.”

Generally, personality disorders include two or more of the following characteristics:

1. Cognition (how the person perceives themselves and those around them).
2. Affectivity (lability and range/intensity of emotional responses, which often veer to inappropriate responses).
3. Interpersonal functioning (see above – lack of empathy as to how the person’s reactions will impact others).
4. Impulse control (overreacting to daily items that others take in stride, regardless of the impact on others).
5. Inflexibility as an enduring pattern of behavior, be it in social interaction or interpersonal interaction.
6. Patterns of behavior that cause distress and/or impairment in social interaction and/or interpersonal reactions.
7. Patterns of such aberrant behavior beginning in adolescence and continuing throughout the person’s life.
8. The behavior cannot be attributed to another mental health issue.
9. The behavior cannot be attributed to a reaction to some external factor (drinking, illicit drugs or reaction to prescription medication).

Diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder set out in the [DSM-V \(380.81\)](#) include:

1. Has grandiose sense of self importance
2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love
3. Believes he or she is “special” and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high status people (or institutions)
4. Requires excessive admiration

5. Has sense of entitlement (i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations).
6. Is interpersonally exploitive.
7. Lacks empathy. Is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.
9. Shows arrogant, haughty, behaviors or attitudes.

We all may exemplify one or more of these traits at a given time. The [DSM-V](#) suggests that in a given sample, 0% to 6.2% of a given community could be classified as narcissists. Of those diagnosed, a half to three quarters are male.

What is distinguishable about an alleged “covert” narcissist? An overt narcissist displays signs of grandiosity. A covert narcissist often focuses on their insecurities, tied to low self-esteem. [Vulnerable, or covert narcissism](#), manifests itself in a “blend of neurotic and antagonistic features.” Moreover, in contrast to narcissism, self-esteem implies a “[nonhierarchical](#) way of viewing the self in relation to others.” Traits are intertwined, such that “...grandiose and vulnerable (hypersensitive) narcissism are not distinct traits, but rather different manifestations of the same phenomenon, which aligns well with clinical theories of narcissism.” The inherent lack of self-esteem suffered by a covert narcissist often drives their need to be hyper-critical of those around them. Covert narcissists can be shy in a public setting, or manipulative – offering a compliment only in the hopes of deriving praise from the very person they praised. Rather than moving on from perceived slights, a vulnerable narcissist might not react in the moment they perceive someone treats them unfairly, but instead, holds a grudge, waiting for an exact moment to exact revenge.

Vulnerable or covert narcissists can be serial interrupters. They can engage in frequent put-downs or remarks that are dismissive of others’ feelings and opinions. They may also shut down, and shut out others, by engaging in ‘the silent treatment’. They may engage in gaslighting, and when called on their (false)

narrative, recoup with throwaway comments in lieu of apologies, such as “Only kidding,” “You’re too sensitive,” or “That’s irrational.”

Dealing with a covert narcissist in the context of divorce means that:

1. Timelines and data gathering may be impacted, but you must strive for a trustworthy, succinct timeline and push for needed documentation.
2. Call “interrupters” on their conduct, and impose rules as needed to assure that all essential team members are allowed to have their say.
3. Insist that everyone is treated with respect, and reciprocate that behavior.
4. This is not a networking opportunity. Focus on “I” rather than on “you” (“I hope you find this idea has merit ...”).
5. Moderate behavior. Communicate effectively in ways that do not exacerbate defensiveness on the part of the narcissist.
6. Think outside the box. Don’t get caught in the vortex of the narcissist’s inflexibility.
7. Take breaks as needed, but, if possible, assure that the covert narcissist is not placing calls to third parties who might influence them. If necessary, use breaks to defuse passive aggressive behavior. This holds for depositions, hearings, child custody evaluation appointments, or trials.
8. Realize that it may take third party witnesses or documentation to undermine the overt or covert narcissist’s predilection for [gaslighting](#).

[Bill Eddy](#) posits that:

It often takes high conflict people quite a while to make progress . . . because they often have to process everything twice: once in their emotional reactions to upsetting information and new ideas, then again to calm down and really think about things logically in a problem-solving manner. . .

Listen to clients for their desired goals, concerns, and what issues will be the tough sell(s) at hearing, mediation or trial. Help clients understand that there are times when, even if they are typically reluctant to confront their spouse due to a perceived imbalance in power, a successful divorce means doing just that. Don’t be

bullied by an overt or covert narcissist. Know who and what you are dealing with, and adjust the approach to your case accordingly.

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