

DIVORCING A NARCISSIST - THE RECOVERY PROCESS

Finally, after all of the emotional and financial trauma, you are divorced. Freedom!

Then the phone rings. Text messages and emails come in. Child support arrives late. Your ex defies your parenting agreement. The abuse continues, and all of the fear, anxiety, doubt, and uncertainty comes rushing back, bringing you to the paralyzing place you hoped was left behind in the divorce process.

If this scenario sounds all too familiar, you are truly not alone. With narcissism being a hot trending topic in divorce discussion forums, Facebook and other social media sites, there is greater awareness, research, resources and professionals who can help and support you.

While the end of a divorce proceeding results in a legal dissolution of the marriage, are you ever *really* divorced? The reality is, that in many cases, you will never completely disconnect from your ex when you share minor children; receive or provide financial support like child support and/or maintenance; attend school functions, sports events and birthday parties together; or even live in the same community.

In our last article, *Divorcing a Narcissist*, our “golden rule”¹ becomes even more relevant and impactful after a legal divorce:

“You cannot change others, you can only change your response and expectations.”

One of our client’s, Leigh, offers advice after experiencing her divorce from her narcissist ex:

“There is no amicable divorce from the scorched earth ex, especially with kids. I survived by utilizing my support system in getting to a secure place inside me, where I know my truth and strength as a mom and a person. Day-by-day, it gets better because I am stronger and focus on my self-esteem and my actions, not his. He proves to me every day why we are divorced.”

The Transition to Post-Divorce

Dr. Beth I. Wilner is a prominent clinical psychologist on Chicago's North Shore. She frequently serves as an expert to the Illinois Courts on family law matters and routinely counsels individuals and families who are married to, or divorced from those with narcissistic personality characteristics. In working with such individuals and families, Dr. Wilner has described individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), as “viewing themselves as superior to others, demanding special recognition and treatment, while exploiting others for their own benefit. These individuals demonstrate a profound lack of compassion and empathy, behave in an arrogant or grandiose manner, are often envious of others, and appear incapable of accepting personal responsibility for their shortcomings or failures.”

¹ Forest and Bluff Magazine, April 2017 edition

Dr. Wilner articulates the transition from the ‘pre’ to ‘post’ divorce process with a narcissist:

“Even after a divorce and living separately, many former spouses lament common themes of control, fear, blame, and abuse, that weave a familiar tapestry of symptoms that often persist for years after the divorce is finalized.”

“If you have survived a relationship with a narcissist and have successfully ended that relationship through separation or divorce, you have begun the enormous journey from **powerless victim** to **recovering survivor**, working to break free from the narcissist’s cycle of manipulation, control and abuse, and reclaiming your personal power.”

At Beermann, we have seen the transition process lead to intense post-divorce litigation, which may be precipitated by a narcissist’s drive to harass, punish, control and win with often no concern over consequences and cost.

In addition to continued financial abuse (e.g. late payment of support, slow and delayed division of assets), the transition also applies to co-parenting with a narcissist, where parents often find themselves struggling with many of the same challenges they experienced while married. Dr. Wilner says that “the narcissistic co-parent may continue to intimidate, blame, criticize and manipulate, with the children at the eye of the storm. These continued behaviors may serve as ongoing triggers of the trauma sustained during the marriage, making it extremely challenging to release the fear, anxiety, guilt, and anger that are at the heart of the victim/survivor experience.”

During her divorce, our client, Leigh, shares that “there was always uncertainty waiting for the next ambush, attack, lie, misdirection and the new motion. It’s just relentless and plain exhausting.” Through, and even after a divorce, we often hear from our clients, “my spouse makes me feel like I am going crazy...like I’m losing my mind!” We find that in many cases, the “scorched earth” mentality does not relent after the divorce is final. Dr. Wilner clarifies that this behavior is commonly referred to as “gaslighting,” an insidious, manipulative form of psychological abuse that deliberately causes confusion and anxiety, resulting in the victim questioning their own perceptions, memory and judgment.

Recovery - Narcissistic Abuse Syndrome

“Very little has been written about the damaging impact that the narcissist’s abusive behaviors have on the emotional, behavioral, and physical health of their victim—yet therapists routinely observe the consequences of this specific form of relationship abuse, even when their clients can’t yet see it in themselves,” notes Dr. Wilner. Within the last decade, the term “Narcissistic Abuse Syndrome (NAS),” has been coined to describe the common impact observed among survivors who lived in a toxic marriage with a narcissistic spouse.

How do I know if I suffer from NAS?

The first step on the road to recovery is to accurately identify the problem, so the most appropriate treatment and resources are utilized. Begin by asking yourself if you experience any of the following:

- Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: nightmares, flashbacks, chronic anxiety, hypervigilence, panic attacks, dissociation, social avoidance or withdrawal, or loss of interest in activities.
- Diminished self-esteem, lack of assertiveness, and second-guessing yourself.
- Depression and hopelessness.
- Self-harm behaviors or suicidal thoughts.
- Physical symptoms or complaints (e.g. headaches, stomach aches, difficulty sleeping).
- Feelings of shame, guilt, or humiliation.
- Feeling like you are going “crazy” or “losing your mind.”
- Questioning your perceptions, memory, sense of reality or judgment.

If you see yourself in several of the above symptoms, you may be experiencing NAS requiring a specialized approach to treatment and recovery. Seeking the help and support you need will be critical for your mental and physical health, your ongoing ability to interact with your ex-spouse, and the security and well-being of you and your family.

Where Can I Find Help?

Fortunately, there are several strategies for help in the post-divorce transition and recovery process. Here are our ***Top 5*** suggestions during the transition process in divorcing a narcissist:

1. **Protect yourself by limiting your face-to-face contact.** Dr. Wilner suggests brief, to the point, business-like messages without becoming defensive. From a legal standpoint, written emails create a paper trail and record of any decision making or communications. Don't respond to provocative or hostile emails and texts for 24 hours. No trigger response. Take time to stop, breathe and plan your response before hitting “send.” If you have children and continue to have parenting issues, get Court Orders to have all parties use organized family communication cross-device applications such as OurFamilyWizard or Talking Parents that can be monitored by attorneys, Children's Representatives and/or Guardian ad Litem. Narcissists will not comply without Court Orders.

2. **Consult with a divorce attorney with extensive experience representing people divorcing (or divorced from) narcissists** to ensure you are counseled on the proper legal strategy necessary, and receive appropriate advice that serves to protect you and your children during and post-divorce. At Beermann, we understand the confluence of psychology and law and how they are inextricably linked, which helps us navigate a plan for clients who are, or have been married to a narcissist.
3. **Confer with an experienced financial planner who understands divorce.** This is especially critical if your narcissistic ex controls or controlled the finances in your marriage. A financial planner can assist in assessing settlement proposals, as well as post-divorce budgeting and wealth management advice. This individual will help you to answer the proverbial question: “what can I afford?”
4. **Align with a qualified and compassionate therapist or other mental health professional with experience dealing with Narcissistic Abuse Syndrome, high-conflict divorce recovery and the legal system.** Having a mental health professional in your corner will provide critical support both through and after your divorce and is essential to your family’s transition, healing and recovery process. We would recommend consulting with a psychologist like Dr. Wilner who specializes in divorce, trauma recovery, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.
5. **Join a specialized divorce recovery group, to gain the support of others** who may be dealing with the same struggles and challenges you face. Hearing other’s stories of struggle and triumph may ease your sense of isolation, provide a fresh perspective, and create hope for a brighter future. At this time, we are working with Dr. Wilner to create a private Divorce Recovery Group focused on Narcissistic Abuse Syndrome, to help victims navigate the psychological and legal aftermath identified in this article. For more information on the Recovery Support group with Dr. Wilner, please feel free to contact us directly², or Dr. Wilner³.

At Beermann, we believe it is essential to identify a wide range of factors that might influence the outcome of a case and develop an individualized divorce legal strategy for the unique and specialized needs of each client and their family. This may include an understanding of mental health needs, child-related concerns, and financial issues at hand. We understand that divorce is the last option and will do what it takes to support you on your journey. We are here to help you understand all of the options available to you, and guide you toward the resources you need.

You can do this.

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