

# Trauma and the Development of Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Characteristics and Treatment Approach

Tugba Huseyn Kizilalma

PhD Student in Clinical Psychology, Baku State University, Baku, Azerbaijan

Corresponding Author: Tugba Huseyn Kizilalma  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7969-7201>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20250207>

## ABSTRACT

Trauma is a condition experienced as a result of an event that threatens or seriously affects a person's physical or mental health. These events refer to events in which the person does not feel safe, cannot control himself or is under intense stress. Trauma can have effects beyond a person's normal reactions and often lead to profound and long-term effects on one's life. Childhood traumas can play an important role in the development of narcissistic personality structure. Narcissism is a personality pattern characterized by an exaggerated perception of one's self-worth and a general lack of empathy. This condition can often be caused by traumatic experiences experienced early in life.

Mental trauma treatment applications in general: Psychotherapy Methods, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR), Psychodynamic Therapy, Drug Therapy (pharmacotherapy).

The research aims to differentiate the relation between trauma and narcissism according to literature materials, and published manuscripts. The method of the study is literature analyzing.

RQ1 (research question 1) - what is the connection between traumatic experience and narcissistic personality disorder?

RQ2 (research question 2) –what are the main steps of the treatment and managing program of NPD?

The material obtained can be useful for students, researchers, theoretical psychologists and psychotherapists.

**Keywords:** trauma, narcissism, narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), abuse and violence

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Recovery after mental trauma is the study of reducing emotional and physical symptoms. In order to ensure this, drug treatments and psychotherapy applications may be required, especially social environment support.

In the analysis and research results, we see that we can examine the reactions to disasters in five stages:

1. First stage of influence: Anxiety and fears.
2. Heroic phase: He exhausts himself physically and mentally to cope with the terrible consequences and losses of the disaster.
3. Honeymoon stage: Great gratitude is experienced for the help of private or state-affiliated organizations for survival.
4. Awakening stage: There is a feeling of obstruction and anger due to the fact that

organizations or officials cannot do what needs to be done on time.

5. Restructuring phase: As a result of mental and emotional restructuring, perceptions become realistic. Responsibility is accepted to bring personal solutions to the problems encountered. The final stage is the point where psychotherapy is expected to be the most efficient under the conditions deemed necessary (Ronningstam, 2013).

Narcissism is a personality trait defined by excessive self-admiration, exaggeration of self-worth, and a tendency to ignore the needs or feelings of others.

According to literature review characteristics of Narcissism were described:

1. Self-importance: The person sees himself/herself as superior to other people and constantly expects attention or admiration.
2. Lack of Empathy: Has difficulty understanding or caring about the feelings of others.
3. Fantasies and Grandiosity: May have excessive fantasies about power, success, intelligence, or beauty.
4. Hypersensitivity to Criticism: May feel great anger or shame when criticized or faced with failure.
5. Jealousy: Often envies others or thinks others envy him/her.
6. Manipulation: May use others to achieve his/her own interests.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) - Narcissism can be found in many people to varying degrees as a personality trait. However, when narcissism is very intense and negatively affects a person's life, it is defined as Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). NPD is listed in the DSM-5 as a mental health disorder and may require treatment (Miller, 2010).

#### **Causes of Narcissism were differentiated:**

- Childhood Experiences: Overly critical, neglectful or overly flattering parental attitudes.

- Genetic and Biological Factors: Differences in some areas of the brain.
- Social and Cultural Influences: Competitive environments, excessive emphasis on success and appearance.

Childhood traumas can play an important role in the development of narcissistic personality structure. Narcissism is a personality pattern characterized by an exaggerated perception of one's self-worth and a general lack of empathy. This condition can often be caused by traumatic experiences experienced early in life (Perri, 2020).

#### **Connections Between Childhood Trauma and Narcissism:**

##### **1. Emotional Neglect or Excessive Criticism:**

- Individuals who experience a lack of love and acceptance in childhood may develop an exaggerated mask of self-confidence to compensate for this deficit.
- Constantly critical or overly demanding parents can create the perception that the child is "not good enough", which can trigger narcissistic defense mechanisms.

##### **2. Conditional Love:**

- When love and acceptance are given based on the child's successes or certain behaviors, the child may try to appear "as they should be." This can lead to the development of a false self instead of the true self.

##### **3. Traumatic Attachment:**

- Inconsistent, rejecting or abusive parents can prevent the child from developing a secure attachment. This situation can cause the individual to constantly feel defensive and exhibit narcissistic characteristics.

##### **4. Abuse and Violence:**

A child who has been physically, emotionally or sexually abused may develop emotional "armor" to protect himself. This armor may turn into a narcissistic structure as an attempt to establish superiority over others and hide his fragility.

##### **5. Over-Exaltation:**

In contrast, over-exaltation of the child and giving him the feeling of being "special" without any limits may also cause the

development of narcissistic characteristics (Miller, 2010).

**Narcissistic Personality Traits and Traumatic Reflections:**

**Extroverted Narcissism:** Arrogance, a sense of superiority and a desire to control others.

**Introverted Narcissism:** Fragility, a sense of worthlessness and dependence on the approval of others.

**Lack of Empathy:** Individuals whose own emotions were not seen in childhood may have difficulty understanding the emotions of others.

**Defense Mechanisms:** Narcissistic individuals may exhibit behaviors such as anger, manipulation and withdrawal in order to protect their fragility.

### **Managing and Treating Narcissism**

**Psychotherapy:** Especially cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and psychodynamic therapy can help narcissistic individuals establish healthier relationships with others.

**Empathy Development Studies:** The person is guided to understand the feelings of others.

**Self-Awareness:** When a person begins to notice their narcissistic tendencies, it may be possible to control these tendencies.

### **Therapy Process:**

#### **1. Trauma Work:**

- Techniques such as EMDR, inner child work, and emotion regulation skills can be useful in processing childhood traumas.

#### **2. Connecting with the True Self:**

- Narcissistic individuals can be helped to connect with their true selves behind their masks.

#### **3. Developing Empathy:**

Cognitive behavioral therapy or awareness studies can help narcissistic individuals understand the emotions of others.

#### **4. Healing of Attachment Wounds:**

- Within a safe therapy relationship, the individual can be helped to experience secure attachment again.

The relationship between narcissism and childhood trauma is complex, but

understanding this connection can help individuals discover and heal their own emotional wounds.

### **Development Process of Post-traumatic Narcissism**

#### **1. Fragility and Defense Mechanisms:**

Trauma creates an injury in the individual's self-perception. This fragility leads the individual to develop defense mechanisms. Narcissistic defenses allow the individual to feel strong, important and sufficient.

For example, the belief that "I am worthless" may be replaced by the belief that "I am special and superior to everyone else."

#### **2. Need for Control:**

Trauma damages the individual's sense of control in their life. Narcissistic characteristics may emerge as an attempt to compensate for this lack of control. The individual tries to ensure their own safety by controlling those around them.

#### **3. Emotional Isolation:**

- An individual who has been exposed to trauma may have difficulty trusting others emotionally. This insecurity may cause insensitivity to the needs and feelings of others (lack of empathy).

#### **4. Development of a False Self:**

- In post-traumatic narcissism, the person usually suppresses their true self and develops a "false self" that presents a strong and perfect image to the environment. This is an attempt to hide the wound of self.

### **Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Narcissism:**

- **Excessive Self-Confidence Displays:** Exhibiting exaggerated self-confidence to hide inner insecurity.
- **Emotional Inaccessibility:** Avoiding establishing emotional bonds due to the impact of trauma.
- **Lack of Empathy:** An individual who has difficulty coping with their own feelings as a result of trauma may also be insensitive to the feelings of others.
- **Hypersensitivity:** Intense reactions to criticism, even anger or manipulative behavior.

- Seeking Approval and Admiration: Constantly expecting external approval to compensate for the feeling of worthlessness created by trauma (Miller, 2010).

Post-traumatic narcissism is a defense mechanism developed by an individual against traumatic experiences. This situation usually occurs as a result of neglect, emotional rejection, abuse or an overly critical environment during childhood. Under the influence of trauma, an individual may develop narcissistic characteristics in order to protect themselves and appear stronger to their environment (Irwin, 1995).

### ***Narcissistic Defenses' Trauma Connection***

- Hypervigilance: Traumatic experiences create a constant state of alertness in the individual. Narcissistic individuals mask this hypervigilance with a desire for "superiority" or "control."
- Anger and Blame: Angry outbursts or a tendency to blame others may be seen as a reflection of the trauma.
- Focus on Success and Power: After trauma, narcissistic individuals may focus on success and power in order to feel valuable (Shaw, 2013).

### ***Therapeutic Approach in Post-Traumatic Narcissism***

#### **1. Processing of Trauma:**

- EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing): Can help restructure the negative beliefs underlying the trauma.
- Inner Child Studies: Emotional wounds experienced in childhood can be healed.

#### **2. Discovery of the True Self:**

- By working with the fragility behind narcissistic defenses, the individual is encouraged to connect with their true self.

#### **3. Empathy and Relationship Skills:**

- In therapy, the individual's ability to recognize and respond to the emotions of others is improved.

#### **4. Emotion Regulation:**

- Emotion regulation strategies are taught so that the individual can control the intense

emotional reactions that develop due to trauma.

#### **5. Acceptance and Self-Compassion:**

- The individual is supported to accept the defense mechanisms they have developed after trauma without judgment and to show compassion to themselves (Shaw, 2013).

Although post-traumatic narcissism is a complex structure shaped by defense mechanisms, it is possible to reach the pain behind these defenses and to ensure that the individual makes peace with themselves through therapeutic interventions (Mahoney et al. 2016).

The people who suffer narcissistic relationship were developed mental health issues. The following skills need to be improved working with these group:

- ✓ Get Professional Help: It's important to get professional help dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other trauma-related problems. A psychotherapist or psychiatrist can offer the person appropriate therapy and treatment options. Therapy supports the emotional and psychological healing process of the person.
- ✓ Join Support Groups: Post-traumatic support groups can provide an environment where the person can share similar experiences and receive support. These groups can help the person feel less alone and learn from the experiences of others.
- ✓ Take Care of Yourself: A healthy lifestyle supports the process of physical and emotional healing. Regular exercise, balanced nutrition, adequate sleep and avoidance of stress are important.
- ✓ Meet Yourself with Understanding: Emotional ups and downs are normal in the post-traumatic period. Instead of criticizing yourself or embarrassing, try to understand and accept your emotional reactions.
- ✓ Talk to People You Trust: Provide emotional support to people you trust, such as your family or close friends. Share your feelings by communicating openly with them.

- ✓ **Improve Stress Management Skills:** Learning stress management techniques can help you cope better in the post-traumatic period. Methods such as meditation, deep breathing, relaxation exercises can reduce stress.
- ✓ **Get Help If You Feel In Danger:** If you feel like you or others are in danger, contact a crisis line immediately or call for emergency help.

Remember that the healing process after trauma is personal and can take time. Everyone recovers at a different pace. You should not judge yourself and get help when needed. Professional help and support can facilitate the post-traumatic healing process and help you lead a healthier life.

Living with a narcissist can be emotionally draining, especially when it involves a partner, parent, or coworker. In these types of relationships, it's important to set healthy boundaries, protect your own emotional health, and manage the relationship. Here are some suggestions for those living with narcissists:

#### 1. Have Realistic Expectations

- **Don't Try to Change Their Personality:** The narcissistic personality structure is deeply ingrained and often unchangeable. Instead of trying to "fix" them, focus on understanding and managing their behavior.
- **Reduce Expectations of Empathy:** Narcissists have limited empathy. Therefore, expecting them to understand your feelings can be disappointing.

#### 2. Set Your Boundaries

- **Be Clear and Firm:** They may try to manipulate or pressure you. Make it clear what behaviors you will not accept.
- **Don't Be Afraid to Say No:** Use your right to refuse if necessary to protect your boundaries.

#### 3. Watch Out for Manipulation

- **Recognize Gaslighting Behaviors:** Narcissistic individuals can make you question your perception of reality. If you constantly feel guilty or wrong, you may be being manipulated.

- **Trust Your Own Truth:** Instead of their narratives, try to validate your own feelings and reality.

#### 4. Focus on Yourself

- **Prioritize Your Own Emotional Health:** Living with a narcissistic individual can be exhausting. So support your mental and emotional health by taking time for yourself.

- **Seek Support:** Feel like you are not alone by getting support from a trusted friend, family member or therapist.

#### 5. Be Strategic in Communication

- **Avoid Conflict:** Narcissistic individuals often feel the need to be right. So use calm and strategic language in discussions.
- **Use Validation Strategy:** Sometimes it can be more effective to emphasize positive aspects rather than criticism. For example, a statement like, "You did really well on that," can reduce tension.

#### 6. Prioritize Your Needs

- **Limit Emotional Investment:** Narcissistic individuals often do not pay enough attention to your needs. Therefore, recognize your own needs and try to meet them.

- **Remember Your Own Value:** Narcissistic individuals may try to belittle you. Remind yourself that you are valuable and sufficient.

#### 7. Be Prepared for Difficult Situations

- **Be Prepared for Argument and Anger:** Narcissistic individuals may react angrily to criticism or setting boundaries. Try to remain calm in these situations and avoid prolonging the argument.

- **Ensure Your Own Safety:** If the relationship has become damaging or involves physical/psychological violence, prepare a safe exit plan.

#### 8. Consider Seeking Professional Support

- **Couple Therapy:** Although narcissistic individuals are unlikely to attend therapy, working on relationship dynamics with the guidance of a professional can be beneficial.
- **Your Own Therapy Process:** You may consider individual therapy to develop your own emotional wounds and boundary-setting skills.

#### 9. Review the Relationship



Is There a Toxic Cycle? If you are constantly being manipulated, belittled or harmed, it may not be healthy for you to continue in this relationship.

Assess Dependency: If you are considering leaving the relationship but find it difficult, assess your level of dependency on the narcissist and get support.

#### 10. Show Compassion to Yourself

Living with a narcissist is difficult and you may feel inadequate, lonely or exhausted at times. Be gentle with yourself during this process and take small steps towards your own happiness. Although living with a narcissist can bring intense emotional struggles, you can protect your emotional health with the right strategies and support. Remember, your own happiness is more important than anything else.

As the researchers mentioned narcissistic trauma can lead to disruption of the personality functioning system. Thus, narcissistic trauma is likely to lead to dysfunction of the self-system, and the ability to enjoy life and communication (Spytska, 2024).

#### Declaration by Authors

**Acknowledgements:** The author is deeply appreciative the support of the supervisor associate prof., doctor of science, Imdad Bayramov during the study.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the Baku State University, 2024.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the author

**Source of Funding:** none

#### REFERENCES

1. Barrett DH, Green ML, Morris R et al. Cognitive functioning and posttraumatic stress disorder. *Am J Psychiatry* 1996; 153(11): 1492-1494.
2. Besser, A., Zeigler-Hill, V., Pincus, A. L., & Neria, Y. (2013). Pathological narcissism and acute anxiety symptoms after trauma: A study of Israeli civilians exposed to war. *Psychiatry*, 76(4), 381-397.
3. Bremner JD, Innis RB, Salomon RM et al. Positron emission tomography measurement of cerebral metabolic correlates of tryptophan depletion-induced depressive relapse. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 1997; 364-374.
4. Dunn AJ, Berridge CW. Physiological and behavioral responses to corticotropin-releasing factor administration: is CRF a mediator of anxiety or stress responses? *Brain Res Brain Res Rev* 1990; 71-100.
5. Irwin, H. J. (1995). Codependence, narcissism, and childhood trauma. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 51(5), 658-665.
6. Mahoney, D., Rickspoone, L., & Hull, J. C. (2016). Narcissism, parenting, complex trauma: The emotional consequences created for children by narcissistic parents. *The Practitioner Scholar: Journal of the International Trauma Training Institute*, 5(1).
7. Miller, J. D., Widiger, T. A., & Campbell, W. K. (2010). Narcissistic personality disorder and the DSM-V. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 119(4), 640.
8. Montoro, C. I., de la Coba, P., Moreno-Padilla, M., & Galvez-Sánchez, C. M. (2022). Narcissistic personality and its relationship with post-traumatic symptoms and emotional factors: results of a mediational analysis aimed at personalizing mental health treatment. *Behavioral Sciences*, 12(4), 91.
9. Ronningstam, E. (2010). Narcissistic personality disorder: A current review. *Current psychiatry reports*, 12, 68-75.
10. Perry, C., & Lee, R. (2020). Childhood trauma and personality disorder. *Childhood Trauma in Mental Disorders: A Comprehensive Approach*, 231-255.
11. Shaw, D. (2013). *Traumatic narcissism: Relational systems of subjugation*. Routledge.

12. Spytska, L. (2024). Narcissistic trauma: main characteristics and life impact. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 212(5), 255-260.
13. Yalch, M. M., & Levendosky, A. A. (2020). Influence of betrayal trauma on pathological narcissism. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 29(9), 1035-1046.

How to cite this article: Tugba Huseyn Kizilalma. Trauma and the development of narcissistic personality disorder: characteristics and treatment approach. *International Journal of Research and Review*. 2025; 12(2): 57-63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20250207>

\*\*\*\*\*