



# Dealing With a Narcissistic Personality in a Divorce

A few years ago, I represented a client in a [\*\*Family Law property settlement\*\*](#) matter. While assisting my client she made a comment which remains in my mind – “I don’t think I’m paying him enough”. She went on to describe a close relationship with her ex-partner; they remained friends who regularly turned to each other for support and guidance. She did not want to “rip him off” and although she acknowledged my advice, she actually wanted to pay him beyond what a court would likely order.

Unfortunately, not all couples are able to resolve their legal disputes amicably; this situation is an exception rather than the rule. I am finding that more of my clients are describing their ex-partner as a “narcissist”.

In the world of clinical psychology, the term ‘narcissism’ and more particularly, Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), is a considerably layered (and controversial) diagnosis. There are four primary types of narcissists: overt, covert, malignant and communal.<sup>1</sup> Focussing on the first two types, the grandiose, overt narcissist is easier to identify than the covert narcissist whose manipulation tends to hide under the guise of victimhood.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, most people exhibiting narcissistic personality traits have not been formally diagnosed as having NPD. Similarly, narcissistic personality traits can sometimes be demonstrated by individuals who do not have NPD. This article will focus on individuals that exhibit narcissistic personality traits and how as legal practitioners, we can remain focused and support our clients through the divorce process.

It is not uncommon for a solicitor to represent a client or oppose a party who displays the following behaviour:

1. A grandiose sense of self-importance.
2. Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, beauty or ideal love.
3. A belief that they are special and unique and can only be understood by, or should only associate with, other special or high-status people or institutions.
4. A need for excessive admiration.
5. A sense of entitlement.
6. Manipulative tendencies.
7. A lack of empathy.
8. Envy of others or a belief that others are envious of them.
9. A demonstration of arrogant and haughty behaviours or attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

Dealing with an individual displaying these traits can be challenging as they are likely to see boundaries and ethical obligations as obstacles to the pursuit of their goals. I have represented many clients where ex-partners have displayed narcissistic personality traits and behaviours including:

1. Delaying the matter by not responding to legal correspondence or being selective in terms of what they respond to.
2. Stalling the process by not fulfilling their disclosure obligations.
3. Concealing their true financial position.
4. Disregarding court orders and/or an agreed way forward.
5. Threats to unsettle my client, including threatening to expose sensitive information.
6. Casting doubt about the client's approach to the matter or their legal representation.
7. Harassing and/or threatening the client's legal team.
8. Changing their mind after an in-principle agreement has been reached and blaming my client for not resolving the matter.

As a lawyer, the challenge of dealing with such behaviour is compounded in circumstances where the client wishes to react to their ex-partner in a similar manner. The Australian Solicitors' Conduct Rules should however always underpin our practice as legal practitioners. As an officer of the court, our paramount duty is to the court.<sup>4</sup> Rule 17<sup>5</sup> makes it clear that a solicitor representing a client in a matter before the court must not act as the mere mouthpiece of the client. With this in mind, I always attempt to focus on resolving the legal issues in dispute by:

1. Explaining the relevant legal principles to my client and applying them.
2. Not allowing my client's emotions or the behaviour of the other party to dictate the process or make us second guess our strategy.

Some clients have wanted to use their Affidavit and legal correspondence to highlight their ex-partner's narcissistic behaviour or to respond to irrelevant allegations. Allowing this would not be fulfilling my ethical duties as a practitioner; I would be doing the client a disservice by not focussing on the legal issues in dispute. The client needs to recognise the other party's behaviour is not necessarily relevant to their legal matter.

One way you can assist the client is by formulating a plan. As lawyers, it is our job to

design a pathway to progress our client's matter; this obviously involves discussing legal strategy. I like to remind my clients of this plan when they become emotional and feel unempowered.

Your client needs to feel supported. It is therefore important to have a team of experts in other fields that can assist your client. It is common for lawyers to recommend their client consults with their GP or a psychologist. At the end of the day, it is not your job to be the psychologist – this is outside your area of expertise.

You should also invite your client to consider having a support person at important meetings. I say this because the narcissistic ex-partner is likely to make your client doubt themselves and/or their legal representation. A scenario I have commonly witnessed occurs when the other party puts forward their offer of settlement. The narcissistic ex-partner attempts to manipulate my client to accept their proposal because “It's off the table in 24 hours and there is no way that the Judge would give you this much money”. The animosity escalates the longer your client delays providing an answer or when they finally say ‘no’ because the proposal is simply not just and equitable.

At all times you need to follow your plan and continue to calmly navigate the process. As daunting as it sounds, I have been involved in matters where my client has told me their ex-partner has threatened to burn down the family home if they did not accept their settlement. Similarly, there have been times where threats have been made against me by the other party.

Although you do your best to support your clients, they will sometimes struggle. In one such instance, during almost every conversation, my client could not help but remind me that their ex-partner was a narcissist, providing examples to support their position. In this case, aside from the ex-partner being dismissive of disclosure obligations, they painted a picture of their commercial enterprise which was completely deceptive. The ex-partner's behaviour made my client even more suspicious and as such, my client became fixated on keeping tabs on what their ex was up to, repeatedly conducting numerous searches, to the point that this consumed the client and delayed the finalisation of their matter. Even after the settlement, my client struggled to move on.

In another matter, the initially self-represented ex-partner of my client called me shortly after I wrote to them and angrily asked “Do you know who I am?”. I replied, you are “Mr X”. He was obviously unimpressed with my response and threatened that if I did not persuade my client to withdraw the court application, there would be “consequences”. My client’s emotional state was fragile and they were extremely fearful of their ex-partner. In this case, my client relied heavily upon a team of experts, which included a psychiatrist. I constantly found myself reminding my client that we were not dealing with a rational person and the ex-partner was adopting a tactic to benefit them and derail our strategy.

As a result of my professional exposure to individuals with narcissistic personality traits, I have reached out to personal contacts in psychology to ask for some suggestions to assist clients and lawyers. Their suggestions include:

1. **Remain factual and unemotional:** Record and document all behaviours and communications. Limit your communication to texts and emails.
2. **Don’t give up your boundaries:** When negotiating, don’t give up your boundaries and don’t allow changes that compromise your position.
3. **Act calmy:** Don’t respond to lies and try to defend against these.
4. **Only negotiate between lawyers:** Avoid being in the same room with the narcissist, avoid eye contact and do not react or show them your triggers.
5. **Don’t be surprised:** A narcissistic ex-partner is likely to lie or manipulate the situation or seek to blame others.

In summary, the amicable couple concerned about not paying the other party enough is likely to remain the exception rather than the rule. We are likely to encounter more clients where one party displays narcissistic personality traits. Dealing with a narcissist will have its challenges; some days you may find yourself questioning why you took on the case. If you’re like me, and you are passionate about helping people through difficult times, you will be able to answer that question relatively quickly. Remember, it may appear that narcissists are prevailing but the reality is they often feel threatened and are likely to be dissatisfied. You are not going to be able to change the narcissist so adhere to your plan and encourage your client to engage a team of experts to assist them through what is a challenging and emotional time.

Many couples are able to resolve their disputes amicably and often, clients are describing their ex-partner as a “narcissist”.

#### Endnotes

1 Dr Ramani Durvasula, ‘The 4 types of narcissism you need to know’, 2018.

2 Ibid; ‘Not all narcissists are grandiose – the ‘vulnerable’ type can be just as dangerous’ | Relationships | The Guardian.

3 Sheenie Ambardar, MD, ‘What are the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder (NPD)?’, 2018. <What are the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder (NPD)? (medscape.com)>; Frequency of narcissistic personality disorder in a counselling center population in China | BMC Psychiatry | Full Text (biomedcentral.com); Untitled (nyu.edu).

4 Rule 3, Australian Solicitors’ Conduct Rules.

5 Australian Solicitors’ Conduct Rules.

[Read the original article here.](#)