

POWER

SURVIVING & THRIVING
AFTER NARCISSISTIC ABUSE



SHAHIDA ARABI

POWER: Surviving and Thriving After Narcissistic Abuse

A Collection of Essays on Malignant Narcissism and Recovery
from Emotional Abuse

SHAHIDA ARABI

Thought Catalog Books

Brooklyn, NY

THOUGHT CATALOG BOOKS

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First edition, 2017

ISBN 978-1945796326

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*For all of the powerful survivors out there—
the warriors and the thrivers.
You deserve everything good and more.*

2

Abusers believe they are powerful. Yet their so-called power lies in their ugliness and contempt for those they cannot defeat. Their hatred is their only source of power and it is ultimately meaningless. That is why they work so hard to maintain a power that will never be theirs. Do you want to see real power?

Observe the warrior who has walked through fire and survived, time and time again, and lived to tell the tale. Those who can rebuild themselves from the light of their own strength and willpower are truly the powerful ones.

—*Shahida Arabi*

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About the Author

Foreword

Therapist Andrea Schneider, LCSW, MSW

Readers are in for a real treat with Shahida Arabi's informative collection of articles for survivors of narcissistic abuse. Time and again, I refer my clients to Shahida's writings as she is spot-on in understanding how to help survivors heal. She gently educates the curious reader who needs an understanding of what Mack truck just hit them in the aftermath of narcissistic abuse and how to understand the complexities of this insidious tsunami. Ultimately, after pinpointing the covert manipulation tactics, Shahida provides a lantern to light the way for survivors on how to heal and move on, leaving no theory or medium for healing unturned.

As a therapist specializing in narcissistic abuse recovery, so many of my clients are healing from encountering an extreme narcissist in work, family or romantic relationships. Unfortunately, this form of emotional abuse is more common than we think, as we are learning in this new age of technology where information about narcissistic abuse continues to become more and more accessible to the public.

Part of the healing process is truly the psycho-education involved in understanding concepts such as the trauma bond that develops between the abuser and victim, the effects of tactics such as projection, gaslighting, hoovering, and the abuse cycle. Shahida's works provide the perfect anchoring and roadmap for understanding this dizzying cycle of emotional abuse, all while providing the resources to help begin to heal the residual wounds.

Shahida is the one author out of a select few that writes eloquently and exquisitely from the perspective of both survivor and researcher: not only with clear evidence-based studies but also weaving in her own personal experience and life wisdom to assist the reader with the next steps in recovery.

With these essays, she has hit the sweet spot—combining psychological research, neuropsychology, as well as the warmth and empathy from her own journey that survivors crave. Shahida's writings are one of a kind and will surely help comfort and inform the survivor as he or she works through recovery. I know countless clients of mine that have benefited from Shahida's work and will continue to do so.

Congratulations, Shahida, on your very important contributions to helping the world evolve in a direction of healing and recovery! What a gift you are!

Andrea Schneider, LCSW

*Author of *Soul Vampires: Reclaiming Your Lifeblood After Narcissistic Abuse* (2015)*

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The Love Story of a Narcissist and His (or Her) Victim

Once upon a time^[1], his tenderness wrapped around you and his fingers traced the outline of your tattoo as his lips brushed against your ear. Most love stories begin with a kiss; this one begins with a well-constructed mask and premeditated murder. A first meeting where the conversation is sex itself; language becomes a weapon and a medicine, a healing balm for your wounds and a sick game of Russian roulette.

He ties his words around you like a corset, fashioning you into his soulmate. Fast-forwarding intimacy on all levels, he plays the victim, weaving a sad story about betrayal by his previous partner who you will later come to learn is also a victim. Faux innocence and an illusion of good-naturedness make for a stunning performance. He's used to the applause and has many admirers lurking in the shadows, but he'll introduce you to them later. The first act still has to proceed. He pretends he's never felt like this before, and his pity ploy feasts on the first taste of your empathy. Your sympathy is delicious, prime for a dinner date; your compassion will make for good dessert.

The real kick is when he pretends to make you the center of his world in spite of his own self-centeredness, much like a predator does when hunting prey. Predators don't take their eyes off of their prey and neither does a narcissist when preparing to devour his victim. You imbibe both the drinks and his masquerade, inebriated on his façade and the charisma which will later become contempt.

First dates quickly become fifth dates; months speed by as you spend weekends wrapped in his arms and the high of shared laughter, inside jokes, and exclusive worlds you've created. Worlds no one else is allowed entry to. You begin to lose touch with friends and family members. He seems to encourage this behavior and at times even demand it. Isolation and constant communication become the norm, but you are prompted to feel as if you desire this isolation at first: it's a protected world, safe, loving, affectionate, at times overbearing. It cannot be tampered with. After years of living in a war zone, you enjoy what feels like a decade of peace, even if you know it is stifling.

Until the first blow, which comes like a gunshot in the dark as you're sleeping. You try to wake from the nightmare only to realize you're still in the midst of dreaming. A dream within a dream. The mask slips and hell becomes a little token of your reality. It's the first jolt of betrayal, of something not being quite right. You rationalize it and minimize it, hoping it was just an off-color comment or a misunderstanding. You dismiss his rage as a "bad day." He then begins to knit an intricate web filled with falsehoods, half-truths, the worst miseries from your past and the best insecurities from your present. New people, as well as new forms of torment, begin to show up; he introduces them into the sacred space of your relationship. He ignores you while he extols them; he demeans you while he praises them. He loves to see you squirm and he loves to play and win games.

He engineers a new false reality for you to live in where you are doubtful of your own inner voice. He begins to twist and turn your strengths into flaws, your talents into travesties, your compassion into naiveté. The blame for everything and anything becomes yours as he erodes your identity, your memory, and your self-esteem. His weaknesses suddenly become your weaknesses; there is no limit to what he will project on your mindscape as he rents space inside of your head and signs a new lease. He invites you to his playground of malice. This particular fun house hosts smoke, mirrors and distortions of your reality.

To the narcissist, romance isn't romance until it's like cocaine. A drug you begin to sniff daily hoping his intermittent kindness will numb the cruelty of the callous words and the actions that add up bit by bit to subtract from your daily joy. Defeat comes in the startled look you give him when he first brushes the proverbial blade across your skin; it comes in the form of a snide, insulting remark that ever so gently passes through his lips, as if testing your threshold and the precipice of a boundary you didn't even know you had to draw in the first place.

This is followed by the remarks that make you question whether he ever even meant to be cruel or not. Where once you felt carefree, lighthearted and loving, you now feel as if you are being turned into a different person that resembles nothing like you once were. Being and feeling crazy, oversensitive and humorless are the portraits he paints to keep you on the edge of never knowing anything for certain. His true intentions are quickly hidden. His loving gentleness is often merged with a condescending contempt which leaves you spinning.

It's a potent cocktail of poison and remedy.

Each withdrawal from the drug leaves you reeling. His addiction is savagely evoking and witnessing your pain and your addiction is attempting

to regain his validation. Wanting to recapture some of the fairy tale bliss in the beginning which has slowly but surely become a nightmare.

Defeat becomes your daily routine as he tests you more and more; harsh words become condescending put-downs; sarcastic jabs become full-fledged attacks; molehills become mountains and partnership becomes a power play. It doesn't matter how much you fight back because your defeat slyly settles in onto the sadistic smirk on his face. Bit by bit, the water reaches a boiling point and you become so accustomed to the heat that you are no longer aware that you are dying. Defeat is now a lithe dancer forced to dance to an impossible rhythm, hoping to escape herself.

Defeat comes rapidly when he begins to rip apart your wounds, slowly and carefully, piece by piece, instead of nursing them; rather than the gentle healer, he becomes the wretched surgeon that manufactures your madness all while sprinkling doubts about your ability to discern what is happening. Defeat replaces your anticipation of a happy ending and supplants the main storyline in your relationship: he rejoices in the gradual slump of your shoulders as he begins to feast on your pain. The virus has found a host; the leech has secured a new life source. The fairy tale has reached midnight but now your bare feet hurt too much to walk away from the illusion of the ball. Somehow, the glass slipper must fit. It just has to, even if it causes your feet to bleed.

The highs are worth the lows (or so your heart says); your mind doesn't listen, it's too high on the Novocain of sweet promises while your psyche is warped behind the prison bars of his projected pain. You become needy for approval, for any scrap of kindness, any leftovers of sincerity, any inkling for the dream he once constructed of meeting someone who truly saw you. Once you feasted on his homemade meals of support, understanding and comfort; now you're malnourished, never enough.

He picks and prods at each flaw, each insecurity, each wound and when there are no more to be found, he creates new ones, blaming you for your own demise. He maims you with the truth of your own humanity. Once you binged on his affection, and now you're starving from his lack of praise. You attempt to restrain yourself from feasting on the love of others while pretending to be satisfied with crumbs.

Your body, once his shelter, now becomes a breeding ground for his lies. Flesh meets flesh in an attempt to find truth where there is nothing but falsehood. Sweet lovemaking becomes devaluing coercion. Silence and a callous smile become the response to your pleas.

Discrepancies begin to add up. Stories begin to self-destruct. Lies begin to love themselves, begetting more lies. The ending is packaged with the maximum amount of cruelty in the shortest amount of time in order to leave the biggest impact.

Closure is the only fairy tale, a myth, a legend. The only true closure can come from within. The truth becomes the only mirror you can trust and sometimes you are the only one who can look in it and find yourself again. This is a game he (or she) doesn't have to win. This is a nightmare you may have to awaken from again and again in order to realize you're no longer dreaming.

This is a type of love story where the happy ending lies in not finding Prince Charming. Rather, it lies in the realization that he never existed at all.

1. A male figure is used to represent the narcissist here, but this is not meant to imply that all narcissists are male. Narcissists can come from any gender and background. ↩

5 Powerful Ways Abusive Narcissists Manipulate You

In popular culture, the term “narcissistic” is thrown about quite loosely and usually refers to vanity and self-absorption. This reduces narcissism to a common quality that everyone possesses and downplays the symptoms demonstrated by people with the actual disorder. While narcissism does exist on a spectrum, narcissism as a full-fledged *personality disorder* is quite different.

People who meet the criteria for [Narcissistic Personality Disorder](#) or those [who have traits of Antisocial Personality Disorder](#) and are on the high end of the narcissistic spectrum can operate in extremely manipulative ways within the context of intimate relationships due to their deceitfulness, lack of empathy, and their tendency to be interpersonally exploitative.

Chronic abuse by a narcissistic abuser can lead to symptoms of PTSD, Complex PTSD, or even what psychotherapist Christine Louis de Canonville calls [“Narcissistic Victim Syndrome.”](#) Although I will be focusing on narcissistic abusers in this essay, this can potentially apply to interactions with those who have ASPD to an extent due to the overlap of symptoms in these two disorders.

It's important in *any* kind of relationship that we learn to identify the red flags when interacting with people who display malignant narcissism and/or antisocial traits so we can better protect ourselves from exploitation and abuse, set appropriate boundaries with others, and make informed decisions about who we keep in our lives. Understanding the nature of these toxic interactions and how they affect us has an enormous impact on our ability to engage in self-care.

Watch out for the following covert manipulation tactics when you're dating someone or in any other kind of relationship:

1. The Idealization-Devaluation-Discard Phase

Narcissists and those with antisocial traits tend to subject romantic partners to three phases within a relationship known as "idealization, devaluation and discard." The idealization phase (which often happens most strongly during the early stages of dating or a relationship) consists of putting you on a pedestal, making you the center of his/her world, being in contact with you frequently, and showering you with flattery and praise. You are convinced that the narcissist can't live without you and that you've met your soulmate. Narcissists mirror and mimic their potential supply's feelings, values, hobbies and interests to manufacture this "soulmate" effect.

Be wary of: constant texting, shallow flattery and wanting to be around you at all times. This is a technique known as "love-bombing" and it is how most victims get sucked in: they are flattered by the constant attention they get from the narcissist. You may be fooled into thinking that this means a narcissist is truly interested in you when, in fact, he or she is interested in making you *dependent* on their constant praise and attention.

The devaluation phase is subsequent to this idealization phase, and this is when you're left wondering why you were so abruptly thrust off the pedestal. The narcissist will suddenly start to blow hot and cold, criticizing you, covertly and overtly putting you down, comparing you to others, stonewalling you, emotionally withdrawing from you and giving you the silent treatment when you've failed to meet their extreme "standards."

Remember that when you don't cater to a narcissist's sense of entitlement and threaten their sense of superiority—their false belief that they have a right to treat people like objects, playing with them and putting them down whenever they please—it results in what we call **narcissistic rage**. Narcissists can't comprehend that there may be anyone independent of them, with boundaries, values and beliefs that don't align with the narcissist's unreasonable demands. When the victim begins to question the narcissist's abusive and cold, withholding behavior, they often stonewall the victim, gaslight them and invalidate them further so that they feel guilty about reacting in the first place.

The first time a narcissist throws you off the pedestal is actually the best moment to leave and it is usually the moment most survivors wish they had left, had they known what they were dealing with. It is at this time when the investment in the relationship isn't as heavy as it might be and the pain is fresh, shocking and traumatizing.

They can throw you off the pedestal in many ways—there may be a negative outburst followed by a great deal of gaslighting and blameshifting; there may be a hideously insulting remark or incident of name-calling disguised as a joke, followed by stonewalling because "you're too sensitive;" there could even be an hour-long conversation which consists of primarily bashing every strength and accomplishment of yours that the narcissist pretended to love in the early stages of the relationship.

Remember, narcissists don't truly "admire" anyone—if they *do* praise you on your strengths and accomplishments in the beginning, more often than not, they are planning ways to set you up to fail and sabotage you in those same areas. They suffer from pathological envy which means that anything you're better at than them will eventually be a subject of denigration rather than praise during the devaluation phase. In the devaluation phase, all bets are off—the true abuser starts unmasking himself or herself.

What drags most survivors back in even after this first incident is the makeup period. The narcissist will convince you that this incident and future incidents have a reasonable explanation behind them—it was really your fault that they called you a terrible name, or they just become abusive when they're drinking, or sometimes they just have "bad days." You, the willing, compassionate, empathic partner, will be prone to agree—perhaps you did do something to provoke it and after all, nobody's perfect, right?

Then comes the narcissist's most insidious trick: they turn you into someone who's more like an addictive gambler at a slot machine waiting for the big bucks rather than your normal, stable self. Since the "hot" aspect of this phase relies on intermittent reinforcement, a technique in which the narcissist gives you inconsistent spurts of the idealization phase throughout, you become convinced that perhaps you are at fault and you can "control" the narcissist's reactions.

This intermittent schedule of rewards is the same way many gamblers get hooked on slot machines—although they know a reward is random, unpredictable and rare, they will still continue to play in the hopes of getting a reward because an unpredictable schedule of rewards is more effective in accessing pleasure and excitement than a predictable one. In fact, as you'll learn in "The Real Reason We Love Bad Boys (and Girls)," an unpredictable schedule of rewards allows more dopamine to flow readily

to the brain, strengthening the very reward circuits that compel us to engage with our source of pleasure over and over again.

In the economics world, this is called the Law of Diminishing Returns, where everything else stays constant while the output decreases over time. The narcissist gets away with giving you less while getting more of your time, energy and effort. That's why the narcissist sneaks in tender moments of love, kindness, generosity and great sex periodically throughout the abuse cycle so that each and every time an abusive incident happens, you feel as if you can win the lottery again—if *only* you could be “perfect” and everything the narcissist demands you to be.

You are misled into thinking that if you just learn not to be so “needy” or “clingy,” the narcissist will reward you with the loving behavior he or she demonstrated in the beginning. These are words that narcissists often use to demean victims when abuse victims mourn the loss of the idealization phase or react normally to being provoked. It's a way to maintain control over your legitimate emotional reactions to their stonewalling, emotional withdrawal and inconsistency.

Unfortunately, it is during the devaluation phase that a narcissist's true self shows itself. You have to understand that the man or woman in the beginning of the relationship never truly existed. The true colors are only now beginning to show, so it will be a struggle as you attempt to reconcile the image that the narcissist presented to you with his or her current behavior.

Even though the narcissist can be quite possessive and jealous over you, since he or she views you as an object and a source of narcissistic supply, the narcissist is prone to projecting this behavior onto you. The narcissist makes you seem like the needy one as you react to his or her withdrawal

and withholding patterns even though the expectations of frequent contact were established early on in the relationship by the narcissist himself.

During the discard phase, the narcissist abandons his or her victim in the most horrific, demeaning way possible to convince the victim that he or she is worthless. This could range from leaving the victim for another lover, humiliating the victim in public, blatantly ignoring the partner for a long period of time without any closure on the breakup, being physically aggressive and a whole range of other demeaning behaviors to communicate to the victim that he or she is no longer important.

Although “normal” relationships can end in a similar manner as well, the difference is that the narcissist often makes it clear he or she intends to hurt you by giving you the silent treatment, spreading rumors about you, moving on very quickly with a new victim, insulting you and disrespecting you during the discard phase.

Unlike “normal” partners, they ensure that you never have closure, and if you decide to leave *them*, they might decide to stalk you to show that they still have control. The narcissist may still reach out to you after the discard or attempt to provoke you in other ways to Hoover you back into the trauma of the relationship, keeping tabs on you even after the discard.

It’s all about control for the narcissist, especially the horrific discard—so if they see you thriving and moving on with your life, they’ll attempt to reel you back in just to subject you to an even more humiliating discard than before. They want to demonstrate you are worthless and that you are *their* property—often simultaneously. It makes no sense to us as empathic human beings who would often wish the best for our partners after a breakup but then again, rational behavior has never been their forte.

2. Gaslighting