

TAHNS3E43 Narcissism 102 Transcript

Chelsey Brooke Cole

Heather: Welcome to That's a Hard No, the podcast about learning to say no and set boundaries to live our best lives. I'm your host, Heather Drago. You may think because of this podcast that I'm a boundary setting expert, but I'm not. I'm an expert at struggling to set boundaries. But you know what? I'm working on it and it is getting easier. Follow along with me as I learn from fellow strugglers and experts so that you too can start saying no without feeling fear, guilt, or FOMO.

Heather: How can you tell if you're being abused by a narcissist? What are the warning signs? And if you are, what can you do about it? I know this is all heavy stuff, but narcissism is sadly pervasive and destructive, and often impinges on people's boundaries and mental health. So we think it's an important topic to revisit. And that's why we've invited Chelsea Brooke Cole back to talk about it. She recently joined us for our Narcissism 101 episode. If you missed it, definitely go back and listen. It's a great one. Chelsea is a licensed psychotherapist, author, speaker, and coach who specializes in narcissistic abuse and relational trauma. Welcome back, Chelsea. It's so good to see you again. Thank you. Thank you for having me. Let's just start at the beginning again, just a little revisit. I know we're going to get into a deeper dive, but just remind us again, how can we spot a narcissist? What are some of the most common red flags?

Chelsey: Mm-hmm. Narcissists are quite grandiose and entitled, seeing themselves as exceptionally unique and special. They tend to have superficial relationships because they view people as pawns to get what they want, and they're very validation-seeking, meaning they need constant attention, validation, admiration. So when you're dealing with a narcissist, you often feel a constant pull. to please them, entertain them, just generally do whatever they want. You experience a lot of cognitive dissonance in these relationships, meaning you ruminate, thinking, did I say that? Is that right? Am I overthinking this? You replay conversations over and over again in your head, trying to make sense of them. And no matter what you do, how hard you try, you feel like it is never enough.

Heather: Yeah. So would it be correct to characterize it as in they're taking all the time instead of giving to the relationship? Like you're the one always giving, giving, giving, and they're kind of sucking the energy out of you?

Chelsey: Yeah. Exactly. Narcissistic relationships are fundamentally unbalanced. Like you feel a constant they're in the center of a black hole and they kind of pull everything into them. I'll remember, I often describe it like when I've been in narcissistic relationships, I felt like I was just in their reality show. Like everywhere we went, it was about them and like they were putting on this persona or this image. And I've been with grandiose narcissists who are that stereotypical narcissist, charming, charismatic, extroverted, and

the vulnerable narcissist, which is they seem really nice or they can seem sullen, depressed, withdrawn. Both of those, I felt like wherever we went, it was their reality show. And I was just literally like a pawn in their show, kind of something on the shelf, however they wanted to use me at the time. Because that's how narcissists view people or relationships, as pawns. Healthy people, you know, value relationships. They put time, energy, effort into them. Narcissists view relationships in very transactional ways. They treat people like a healthy person treats products. For example, me and my coffee maker have a great relationship. I get up in the morning, it makes me coffee, it serves the function I need it to in my life. If I got up in the morning and my coffee maker stopped working, I would probably throw it out and get a new one because I need some coffee. But that is how narcissists treat people, and they feel entitled to do so. Kind of scary.

Heather: Yeah. So, wow. That is really a great way to put it. And something you said kind of triggered some curiosity in that you said there are the grandiose type, which is what I always think of as a narcissist. But then you said there are these other types who can be more vulnerable or more, or just a different kind of personality type. And I've just never thought of that. So can you tell us a little more about that?

Chelsey: Sure, yeah. The vulnerable type, you'll often see this on social media talked about as the covert narcissist or covert narcissism. It's said that way because they don't appear overtly entitled and grandiose. They are still entitled. It just looks different. Like a grandiose narcissist entitlement is like, world, look how great I am. A vulnerable narcissist entitlement is like, why doesn't the world see how great I am? Why is everyone always out to get me? Why does nothing go my way? So they tend to have one of two presentations, depending on what suits them best at the time. They're either really nice, they want to be viewed as super courteous, super kind, super empathetic, but it's all that is a facade. They don't actually care. They care about looking that way. Or the second presentation is of being, you know, very victimized and sullen and withdrawn.

depressed. A lot of therapists even think vulnerable narcissists from this presentation are depressed because that's what they look like. But no matter how much you give, no matter how much you try to make them better, no matter how much you're there for them, it's never enough. And vulnerable narcissists feel entitled to your time, your resources, your money. And if you ever try to set boundaries or walk away or ask for a more balanced relationship, they will blame you, guilt you, and shame you for that.

Heather: That's fascinating. Yeah. And I'm sure there are lots of strained relationships where people are experiencing that and don't even realize narcissism is the core root of the problem.

Chelsey: Yeah. Because especially for vulnerable narcissists, they draw you in by gaining your pity, your sympathy, your attention. And so if you're a helper or an agreeable person, a.k.a. me, I've definitely been drawn into these relationships. then you just feel sorry for them. Like that's one of the biggest emotions, I guess, you know, ways you can

recognize you're dealing with a more vulnerable type of narcissist is pity. Like you just feel bad for them, almost like they're delicate. Like you can't ask too much of them. You can't expect too much of them. You, you can't even share with them what's going on in your world because it's like, well, I don't want to burden them because they're just going through so much. And so you just feel pity. You feel sorry for them. And that is that's a way that a lot of agreeable people get sucked into those kinds of relationships because you think, well, no one's so nice or so depressed or victimized could be a narcissist because narcissists are overtly grandiose and entitled and arrogant. And a vulnerable narcissist does not look like that. So that's that's a big misconception.

Heather: Yeah, and it seems to me, too, that if someone is not a narcissist but is exhibiting those kinds of behaviors and phrases, like, why is the world out to get me? And if it's temporary, someone might go through a phase where they're feeling very downtrodden or things have gone wrong for a series of time and they're kind of acting that way, but it's temporary, whereas a narcissist, it's just like, that's how they always are.

Chelsey: Exactly. It's pervasive. That's such an important point because a lot of people will hear this and think, oh, well, I did that summer. I was kind of entitled or defensive that one time. Like, does that make me a narcissist? It's about patterns of behavior over time. Narcissists are the ones that are consistently high conflict, rigid in their thinking, they're antagonistic, victimized, vindictive, entitled and emotionally dysregulated.

Because if you catch a narcissist on a good day when supply is high, they just got a promotion, someone just flirted with them, things are going well, they're feeling good. They can seem emotionally regulated and you think, oh this person's like fine, they're good. If you catch a narcissist on a bad day when supply is low, someone else got the promotion, they're being treated like a normal person, essentially like normal person instead of royalty, then they can seem withdrawn, sullen, depressed, or rageful and lash out at you. So it's these patterns of behavior over time. It's definitely not just a one-time occurrence. It's something that's pervasive in this person's life.

Heather: Wow. So you've already talked about some red flags, like when you're talking and it's the, why is the world out to get me all the time? And you can't share about your life. What are some other red flags for the grandiose type of narcissist and then this vulnerable type? And is there another type we haven't talked about yet?

Chelsey: In my book I talk about six types, so I don't even know if we have time. But the good thing is all these red flags will apply regardless because the different types, they can look and feel differently, so they kind of have a different presence sometimes. But the core traits, they're all entitled, grandiose, they have superficial relationships, they're exploitative, they lack empathy. So all that's going to be true regardless of the type that you're dealing with. One of the first changes or red flags people are usually aware of is changes in their thinking. You start ruminating a lot, second-guessing yourself, wondering, did I say that? Is that right? You know, trying to make sense of conversations because you leave conversations feeling more confused than when you started them.

And so you keep trying to make sense of this person's behavior. A lot of times, let's say this is your spouse. And you have this idea of this person, like obviously you married them so that maybe there's something you liked about them. And so you have this idea of who they are. And when you're married, you expect to be able to rely on, receive love and support from your spouse. So when you're married to someone and they're critical or they're antagonistic or they belittle you, we feel uncomfortable with the anxiety that arises from that mismatch between our expectations and reality. That's called cognitive dissonance. When, you know, something is not adding up. And so in order to try to alleviate our own anxious feelings, we start justifying, rationalizing, explaining away this person's bad behavior. So instead of saying, you know, I'm married to someone and they're critical of me or they're abusive, we say things like, well, Yeah, my spouse says things that are hurtful, but they don't really mean it. Or they've really just been stressed at work. We just need to get through the holidays. Things have been tough recently. So we start kind of giving that wiggle room for that person because things are not adding up. And if you don't realize you're dealing with a narcissist, then you think there is a solution. You think, they are who I think they are. We're just going through a rough patch or we're just miscommunicating or we're having a different attachment styles right now or our love language is different like whatever you know popular psychology thing that we're talking about that day on relationships you think oh that's what it is. And you think it's solvable. So you think if I can just kind of twist this problem around enough and ruminate about it and overthink it and then I can figure it out. But the reality is if you're with a narcissist, no matter what you do, you're not going to be able to figure it out because you can't solve a problem that you're not causing. Sounds fun. Heather: And I'm wondering if a lot of the self-help and, like you said, the pop psychology stuff that people are constantly seeking, if it's just them trying to figure that out, just trying to...

Chelsey: Yeah, there's certainly a place for it, but it definitely serves as a distraction. I'll say for me before, it's been a long journey for me understanding the narcissist that I dealt with in my life. And I kind of grew up in a household where my dad was more of a neglectful narcissist, just emotionally cold, distant, one person at home, another person out in the world. So I was very used to feeling like I needed to try to be perfect to be loved, that conditional love was typical for me. My mom was a total empath, so I had like a secure attachment with her, but dad was narcissistic. So I, you know, by the time I got into dating and into relationships, romantic relationships, I was very used to this kind of hot and cold, trying to make things better. Things are good, then things are bad. And so that kind of set me up to expect that in relationships. And so you know, sometimes you end up in these relationships because it's kind of what you know. It's like that's what you have been used to if you grew up in a dysfunctional or chaotic or somewhat toxic home yourself. So it might even be starting to recognize, oh, maybe I'm I'm kind of used to these. because I grew up this way. And that's something I talk about

in my book too. Like, what did you grow up with? Because that may inadvertently kind of set you up to feel like these relationships are normal because they feel familiar.

Heather: Yeah, we've heard that before from other therapists as well. It's like a sort of a neurological, like,

Chelsey: The nervous system.

Heather: Yeah. The nervous system is like, I don't feel secure. This is not what I'm used to. And then you seek out the thing that you're used to. Yeah. Exactly. We are complicated beings. So what are some other red flags? So you talked about this first one where you're kind of ruminating and trying to figure out what you can do to make things better.

Chelsey: Mm-hmm. If you're consistently in one of the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses in a relationship, that is something definitely pay attention to. So we're familiar with fight or flight. We know kind of when we get activated because our autonomic nervous system scans the environment for cues of safety or danger. It's called neuroception. So you know that gut feeling you get that something is off about this person, or you shouldn't walk down that alleyway, like shouldn't go that way. There's something about the situation that's like, ooh, this doesn't feel right. So neuroception is always working in the background. So a lot of times people will say in hindsight, when they end up in a narcissistic relationship, I knew something didn't add up about them. I knew something was off. But we dismiss, like we don't trust our gut feeling. So if you're in a relationship and you consistently feel pulled to be in a fight response, maybe you're arguing back with that person. You're taking, you know, you're willing to take the fight. You're willing to stand your ground initially and be like, no, I did not say that, or this is what happened. So you kind of always feel activated. Or maybe you're in a fight where you just stay so busy so you don't have to think about what else is going on in the relationship. You become obsessed or fixated on a particular area of your life like work or going to the gym or whatever else can be a distraction for you. Or the shutdown response, the freeze that we talk about. Perhaps you're with this person and you consistently find yourself kind of just shutting down, feeling numb, apathetic, depressed, withdrawn, almost like you're disconnecting from the world and yourself, where you don't even feel a lot in general anymore. You don't know what you think, how you feel, because it's not even safe to identify your feelings, and you know that your feelings are going to be dismissed anyways in this relationship, so you start to disconnect from them yourself. Or finally, the fawn response. That's a newer thing that we haven't talked about as much or don't hear as much about. But Pete Walker really talks about this in his book on complex trauma. And it's this sense of people in a fawn response feel that they have to please the other person. They have to figure out what this other person needs from them. They're always scanning to see, what's the emotional temperature of the room? What does everybody need from me here? And you become so invested in understanding what those other people need or what their

emotions are, you feel like you can't talk about your own feelings or identify them. In fact, you don't even know if that's an option. You literally feel like you have to choose between your needs or their needs, and it can't be both. So if you find yourself consistently in that, that's a problem.

Heather: I'm smiling and nodding, because that's kind of how I grew up. And it's sort of a pattern I've been learning to break and unlearn my whole adulthood. Yeah.

Chelsey: Yeah, exactly. And that goes back to that piece of why these relationships can feel familiar. You know, familiar doesn't necessarily mean safe or healthy.

Heather: Yeah. OK, so we've hit two big, big red flags. Are there some others that I know that there's probably a huge amount in your book? So, like, what are some other important ones you can touch on?

Chelsey: Yeah, yeah, there's so many. Another pattern that tends to happen in narcissistic relationships is you'll notice that this person either can be the hero or the victim, but they can't just be on level playing field with you. So a lot of times narcissistic abuse, like narcissists, need to be seen as the hero in certain situations. Like they might go out of their way to help friends, and that can be really confusing if you're the partner of a narcissist. Like, why do they care so much about being so, you know, helpful at work or to their friends, but then at home, they're completely disengaged and disconnected. What's wrong? What am I doing? But you have to consider, well, how are they benefiting from that? Narcissists really care about their image and how things look. So if they can look good by showing up for a friend or showing up for work or getting a promotion or getting that recognition for their achievements, then they are motivated to do that because that's for their image. So they like to be in this hero position or they're in the victim, where you can't talk to them about their inconsistencies, or they're lying, or they're betrayals, or how you feel, because as soon as you do that, they ask why you can't ever focus on anything good they do. Why are they never enough? Why do you always ask so much? Why are you always, you know, wanting something more from them? So that's something that a lot of narcissistic abuse survivors will notice in relationships is that this person is either always the victim or the hero. And they can never just be like a neutral person that you can actually share your genuine feelings with. Wow, okay. That's intense. Yeah, it kind of mirrors the narcissistic cycle of abuse, really, because there's that Idealized, devalue, discard. So if they're in, you know, being a hero, then you might be in that idealized phase, but in the devalue or discard phase, the narcissist is going to be the victim and they're going to blame shift and say that things are your fault. So sometimes it mirrors that as well.

Heather: Okay, we'll be right back with more about narcissism, narcissistic abuse with Chelsea. And we're back with Chelsea Brooke Cole. So Chelsea, how do people become narcissists? Like, is this something that you're born with? Is it something that you come from a traumatic childhood and you just inherit these learned patterns? Or is this

something you can develop as an adult? And like, like when, how can you spot if it's starting to happen and help someone or help yourself kind of break out of that?

Chelsey: Yeah. Well, it is a learned pattern. It's not something that you're born with. It's always interesting putting the puzzle pieces back together because we're essentially still building that. There's still a lot of research to be done on what creates a narcissist. In hindsight, it's always 20-20. So we can usually look back and go, oh yes, this contributed in this and this. So when we do look back, what we see is there is a genetic component in the sense of their inborn temperament. That has to do with how disagreeable or agreeable you are, how conscientious you are, how introverted or extroverted you are, some of those core traits of your personality that don't tend to change a lot. So narcissists do tend to have a more disagreeable temperament, meaning they're harder to soothe, they push more for their own way. You can contrast that to an agreeable person who's quite empathetic and kind and cares about being cooperative and harmonious, like, nah. Narcissists care about getting what they want, how they want it, and they struggle regulating their emotions, so they don't do very well with stress. So there's that part of it. They also, though, that's not enough just for someone developing into narcissism. There tends to be an environment when they're growing up that's both overindulging and underindulging. It's an environment where they are overindulged in things like status, appearance, or just generally how things look, achievement, success, and an underindulgence in that internal world of empathy, integrity, making sure your words and actions match. Helping them with identifying or regulating their emotions, there tends to be little of that. And so it's almost like it gets out of whack, like there's way too much focus on what things look like and not enough focus on who you are and developing that core sense of self and especially a lack of empathy. That's the hallmark trait of narcissism is a lack of empathy. So, you know, those are the kinds of things that we look for. And then you really can't say, oh, this person's narcissistic until their mid-upper 20s is when you can start to say, okay, this is really like their personality. And once it is set in stone, it's quite rigid and inflexible. But there are periods of your life, kids or teens, where they tend to be a little more selfish and entitled and they're pushing away from parents. That doesn't necessarily mean, oh, they're going to turn into a narcissist. So it's not until they're in their late 20s, because that's when the brain is fully developed, that we can see this as a real stable personality style.

Heather: So I'm thinking of not my teenagers, of course, but teenagers I've encountered in the past who seem pretty narcissistic and self-involved. And what's the difference between that sort of self-involved teenage kind of, you know? Yeah. Well, rudeness, right? You know, is it just that it's become hardwired because they've just gotten away with it for so long? Or it can be.

Chelsey: And when you think about our culture and how the impact that social media has played, like five year olds are taking selfies and thinking about how they look and they know that their parents are videoing them. So there's that more conscious

awareness at earlier and earlier ages of how do I look and how is this going to be on videos? And kids know that it's being posted to social media and then their parents or they will get attention for it later. So that's a whole other conversation of the impact social media has had on really highlighting narcissistic traits and not only highlighting it, but encouraging it. Rewarding it. Right. So the question is, do they get stuck there? Because that's what we see in narcissistic adults, is that they seem very emotionally immature and stunted. That is a part of narcissistic personality, is they kind of get stuck being a teenager and a two-year-old throwing a temper tantrum. They're either like super defiant and over-the-top emotionally or They're kind of like a two or three year old who hasn't learned to regulate their emotions. So there's that emotional stuntedness that happens with narcissists. So some teens grow out of it. Hopefully it's just that that pattern or that period of being at that point in their life. Some don't. But, you know, don't lose heart. If you see your nurse, you know, your teenager being a little bit entitled or selfish, it might be a wake-up call to have more conversations with them about empathy and how their behaviors are impacting others and helping them get involved in things that maybe help them think outside the box and think outside of themselves and what's going on in their own life doesn't necessarily mean they're going to turn into a narcissist.

Heather: Right, right. So let's bring this back to boundaries for a minute, since we like to talk about those here. So let's say you see some red flags, or you're starting to recognize after hearing this, like, oh, I am in a relationship like this. What are the kinds of boundaries? And what if you don't have an option of whether or not you're in a relationship with this person? Maybe this is an employer, or maybe this is a coworker you have no control over if they get hired or fired, or maybe it's a family member that you can't just you know, remove yourself from. So how do you set boundaries with people like this and coexist with them?

Chelsey: The important thing to keep in mind is that narcissists feed off of your emotions, what you give them, what you tell them. And so once you start to recognize that you're dealing with a narcissist, you want to start practicing something called gray rock. Essentially, it becomes interesting to the narcissist as a literal gray rock. Your responses become very muted. Your facial expressions are pretty muted. Your responses are, hmm, that's interesting. Yes. No. Okay. I can meet at that time. If this is at work, you keep conversations focused on work. You're not talking to them about family life or personal issues because they're undoubtedly going to use that against you somehow. So your conversations become kind of very surface level. You basically start to expand your bubble. In my book, I talk about how Our boundaries are like a bubble. You know, we hear people say, you're in my bubble, when we mean you're in my personal space, essentially. So we're familiar with what that feels like with a physical boundary. I think of all boundaries, mental and emotional, as a bubble that surrounds you. Protective shield, yes. And when you start to feel, you know, like your bubble is expanding, like you're

trying to take on responsibility for things that are outside of you, that's a sign of, hey, I need to bring my bubble back. And narcissists often make you feel like that, like that you are responsible for them and everything that happens for them and how they feel and what's going on in their life. Or you might notice that you start to feel pressured inside your bubble, like pressure to agree, pressure to do what they want, pressure to think and feel the way that they want you to. And so those are signs you're dealing with a narcissist or toxic person. And it's something you can bring to mind to think about. It's like, where's my bubble at right now? Am I expanding it past what I can really control? What can I do here? I can control my thoughts, my feelings, That's about it. Like anything outside of my bubble that has to do with their thoughts, their feelings, their responses, what they do, what they say is outside of my bubble. So it's a good visual too, to keep in mind of like, where do I feel right now? And how can I protect myself in my bubble?

Heather: Wow. Okay. So be a gray rock, be born. Don't give them much.

Chelsey: Yeah.

Heather: Don't don't give don't feed the monster, basically. Right. So what other kinds of boundaries or boundary setting advice might you have or or types of things that might be if a bound this kind of boundary isn't respected, then that is another warning sign or. Yeah. Any thoughts there?

Chelsey: Yeah, when we look at people who are most resistant to narcissists, and that's a whole interesting conversation of like, who's resistant to narcissists and who isn't, or is there such a thing? It's the people who know themselves, who know their likes and dislikes, who are able to say, this is how I feel and that is okay, who feel confident in being able to say, right or wrong, this is how I feel right now, or this is what I need right now. And I know that a lot of people, if you're in narcissistic relationships, I know for me, I was not always at that place. Like, you don't even know what your thoughts or feelings are. You certainly don't feel like you have a right to how you think or what you feel. So starting to take ownership of that is a really important way to set boundaries. In my book, I talk about this. I name it Silent Boundaries. These are the boundaries that you're setting just in your own mind, the ones that no one else even knows you're setting. You definitely don't want to go to a narcissist or a possible narcissist and say, hey, You can't talk to me like that anymore and I'm setting boundaries like don't do that because if they are a narcissist they're definitely going to push back on that and they may actually come at you harder because narcissists like control. So you just want to know in your mind, okay I'm starting to notice this person questions everything I do or says, they're inconsistent, there's lies, there are things that are not adding up. So I'm going to start reaffirming in my mind what is truth. What is reality? I need to do reality checks with myself. That means maybe you start writing things down and so you have that physical proof of that text or that phone conversation. Maybe You share it with them when you're ready to have that kind of conversation, knowing that they're going to push back.

But maybe for a while you don't. You keep that to yourself, just so you start to see what is real anymore. So you start to feel like, okay, I can put my feet on stable ground. I can know what is true and what is not. Once you have those patterns listed out, Like you've been taking notes and you can see that, yeah, they did say this and here's the text message that proves that we did have this conversation. Then you can start to feel like you're a bit more on solid ground and set those silent boundaries in your mind where, yeah, the narcissist is going to talk and they're going to be antagonistic and they're going to keep being narcissistic, but you no longer are attaching to what they say. There's a big difference, and before you realize you're dealing with a narcissist, you are constantly doing this ping-ponging back and forth because you wonder, well, whose reality is right? Like, what is true? And the narcissist is so good at selling you on their version of reality. They want to control. Ultimately, they want to be inside your head, because they know that's the most powerful place they can be. So, in order for you to start setting boundaries, you have to take your mental and emotional real estate back. You have to take ownership of your thoughts and feelings, and you can do that when you've had the space to write things down and start to see these patterns, and then start to say in your own head, actually, I didn't say that, or this is what we talked about, this is how I feel, this is what I think. And when you no longer attach to what the narcissist says, that's when you really start taking your power back.

Heather: I also think it's important, you were saying, you know, know thyself. It's important to know what you stand for, what your principles are, what you believe in, independent of anyone else. What are my core beliefs? And we just had a leadership consultant on that we were talking to, Andrea Peck, and she said, to be a good leader, you have to be comfortable with letting people down and you have to trust that they can handle it. And maybe a narcissist can't handle it, but that's really not your problem, right? So, I mean, unless they are abusive to you in some other way, but you kind of have to be okay with letting people down. And I often talk about being comfortable with being uncomfortable. And I think that fight, flight, freeze, or fawn thing comes from us trying to get rid of that uncomfortable feeling. And we have to be okay with feeling that way.

Chelsey: That's a huge healing piece and it's one that takes survivors a long time because you are conditioned to feel guilty and that not only that what you think or feel is wrong but that you don't have a right to it. So that's why I like the image of the bubble because it really helps you radically accept what you can and can't control and you cannot take responsibility for things you can't control. That's why we have to start with Where is that boundary? Where's that line between where I end and the other person begins? Because if you think, as the narcissist wants you to believe, that you are responsible for how they think and how they feel and for hurting their feelings and ruining this relationship, and if you could just be good enough, then everything would be fine. If you accept that as truth, you can't set a boundary in that. You feel tons of guilt

and shame around it. You don't even feel like it's an option, which is why knowing what your thoughts and feelings are and knowing that you have a right to them is such an important part because those are the building blocks for setting boundaries.

Heather: Right. So if you're in a relationship with a narcissist, is that inherently an abusive relationship or is there kind of a scale of you're dealing with this narcissistic person and yeah, you have to interact with them versus we're really in an abusive situation? Can you talk about the difference?

Chelsey: Yeah, I think that goes back to a little bit of, you know, narcissism exists on a spectrum. So you can be a little bit narcissistic to highly narcissistic. If you're dealing with a malignant narcissist, you can pretty much guarantee you're being abused because they're very, they're coercively controlling, they're manipulative, they're gaslighting you. Even the moderate narcissists on that spectrum are going to be gaslighting you, and that does fall under emotional abuse. So there's certainly going to be elements of mental and emotional abuse in that relationship. If you're dealing with a mild narcissist, someone who's kind of entitled, they're a bit of a know-it-all, maybe they're great for livening up a dinner party, but they're really not going to be there for you, you know, empathetically, or they're not going to be the person you want to go to to have any kind of conversation where you actually need someone's presence or someone's empathy. Is a mild narcissist going to be abusive? They might be more annoying. It can kind of be frustrating dealing with them. If it's someone you have to deal with consistently, then certainly it could end up being abusive or traumatic, depending on how it impacts you and how intently they are selfish and antagonistic or how much gaslighting there is in that relationship. But if you're dealing with a moderate to malignant narcissist, then there's definitely going to be impacts of mental and emotional abuse, because that's really how I define narcissistic abuse. It's a multi-layered attack on your sense of self, a dismantling of who you are and what you believe you're worth. And it includes consistent and repetitive acts of manipulation, coercive control, belittling, criticizing, and all of those things fit under mental and emotional abuse tactics.

Heather: So how do you get out? How do you get out of a narcissistic, or I'm sorry, how do you get out of an abusive, narcissistic relationship? Like, how do you, are there resources out there? How do you start in a safe way?

Chelsey: Yeah, it's such a process. And I say that up front so that people know it is a process and you need to take it step by step. A lot of people, when they come to me for, you know, counseling, they know something is off, but they're not even sure what it is yet, and they're not even sure what it is, and even once they know what it is, they still don't know what they want to do about it. So a lot of times, I will tell people initially, we are just coming to try to put the pieces of the puzzle together. We're going to throw all the puzzle pieces out on the floor, and then we're just going to pick them up and look at them and kind of put them back in a way until it starts to make sense. And for a lot of

people, it's really important to start there, and To look at this as just something you're learning about, you're gathering information, you're observing. Instead of reacting so much to that person and trying so hard to make it work, you need to take a step back. You need to mentally and emotionally detach or disengage so you can start to see what's going on. So writing things down can be obviously a great way to do that, to start to write down, well, this is what happened and this is what I said and this is what they said. And you can start to see those patterns if there are manipulation or gaslighting They come back and they deny reality and what has happened. So it's definitely a process, and I would tell people initially, decide not to decide as far as what you're going to do with this information. Because sometimes people are hesitant to really seeing what it is, because they're like, but what if my mom is a narcissist, or my dad, or my spouse? Then what am I going to do with it? And because they're scared to know what they're going to have to do with it, once they see it, they don't even want to see it. Like there's this push and pull in their mind of maybe they didn't mean it, maybe it really wasn't this. So in order to even start to see what you're dealing with, just decide not to decide. You're in an information gathering process and period. Then once you have those pieces and you're like, oh, I do see what's happening here, then you can say, OK, well, what do I want to do with that? And that's where there are options of if I leave, what does that look like? If I stay, what does that look like? Is this a relationship I can leave? If this is in my family, if this is a co-parent, which is one of the hardest things to deal with if you're dealing with a narcissistic co-parent, then what are my options? What does that look like? But you can't get there until you recognize what this actually is.

Heather: Well, tell us more about your book. I know we touched on it last time, but I'd love to hear more about it.

Chelsey: Yes, so I wrote this book because what nurses do is so crazy, you feel crazy for even explaining it. And survivors of these relationships often feel alone and isolated, like no one gets what they're going through, and initially you don't even know what you're going through. So I wrote this book so every survivor can feel seen, validated, understood, to know that they're not crazy, this is real, and there is a way to heal. And it's why I break the book down in three parts, the inner workings of a narcissist, and then how to heal. That's where we talk about, like, what was your childhood like, and trauma bonds, and how to heal those attachment wounds. And finally, once you've seen all of that, how do you set boundaries to protect your healing? So a lot of people have told me after reading this book, it's like you were in my head seeing my thoughts or in my home witnessing or describing these interactions, or I finally feel like someone else gets it because no one else around me gets it. So that's my hope for this book is that really helps people feel validated and understood and know that they're not crazy, this is real and there is a way to heal. And the name of your book, the title? If only I'd known how to outsmart narcissists, set guilt-free boundaries and create unshakable self-worth.

Heather: Yep, and we'll put a link to that on our website and share it all around. Thank you. So this has been so enlightening. I thought I learned so much last time and I learned even more this time. There's so much to go into. I really appreciate this. Yeah, thank you. And I know, And somebody, at least one person will listen to this, and I think they will feel seen and validated because, you know, in different situations of my life where I've had specific things happen, I felt like I was the only one. And then when you find out that, oh, this is not a unique experience, you know, and others have felt this way too, like it is such a relief to know that, you know, I'm not crazy and there is help and there's a, This has a name.

Chelsey: There's a path forward.

Heather: Yeah, it has a name and there's a path forward. So I really appreciate you sharing all of this and coming on and talking with us again. Yeah, thank you for having me.

Chelsey: And sharing all your knowledge. Yes, my pleasure. Thank you.

Heather: Okay, so that's it for now. Thanks for listening. That's A Hard No is a production of Clever Girl Marketing, my little agency in Cleveland, in partnership with our friends at Evergreen Podcasts. Many thanks to our amazing team, including Maura del Rosario, our production and marketing coordinator. Noah Fouts, our amazing producer, editor, and composer, who wrote our theme music and performed it with his band, The Big Leagues, and our new video producer and editor, Kay Holmberg. You can find show notes and resources on our website, and you can find other fun stuff on our socials. We're Hard No Podcast, and we're now on YouTube, so check us out there. Make sure to like and subscribe on your favorite listening platforms, but especially Apple. Can you please do us a favor? Give us a rating and review so more people can find us and learn how to say no. So until next time, thanks for listening. And remember, saying no isn't just okay. Saying no is key to living an authentic, fulfilling life. So do it. Find your no and say it with me.