

20 Diversion Tactics Highly Manipulative Narcissists, Sociopaths And Psychopaths Use To Silence You

By Shahida Arabi Updated April 4, 2019

A deep dive into understanding the narcissistic sociopath, psychopath, and other anti-social personalities.

Toxic people such as [malignant narcissists](#), [psychopaths](#) and those with [antisocial traits](#) engage in maladaptive behaviors in relationships that ultimately exploit, demean and hurt their intimate partners, family members and friends. They use a plethora of diversionary tactics that distort the reality of their victims and deflect responsibility. Although those who are not narcissistic can employ these tactics as well, abusive narcissists use these to an excessive extent in an effort to escape accountability for their actions.

Here are the 20 diversionary tactics toxic people use to silence and degrade you.

1. Gaslighting.

Gaslighting is a manipulative tactic that can be described in different variations of three words: “That didn’t happen,” “You imagined it,” and “Are you crazy?” [Gaslighting](#) is perhaps one of the most insidious manipulative tactics out there because it works to distort and erode your sense of reality; it eats away at your ability to trust yourself and inevitably disables you from feeling justified in calling out abuse and mistreatment.

When a [narcissist, sociopath or psychopath](#) gaslights you, you may be prone to gaslighting yourself as a way to reconcile the cognitive dissonance that might arise. Two conflicting beliefs battle it out: is this person right or can I trust what I experienced? A manipulative person will convince you that the former is an inevitable truth while the latter is a sign of dysfunction on your end.

In order to resist gaslighting, it’s important to ground yourself in your own reality – sometimes writing things down as they happened, telling a friend or reiterating your experience to a support network can help to counteract [the gaslighting effect](#). **The power of having a validating community is that it can redirect you from the distorted reality of a malignant person and back to your own inner guidance.**

2. Projection.

One sure sign of toxicity is when a person is chronically unwilling to see his or her own shortcomings

and uses everything in their power to avoid being held accountable for them. This is known as projection. Projection is a defense mechanism used to displace responsibility of one's negative behavior and traits by attributing them to someone else. It ultimately acts as a digression that avoids ownership and accountability.

While we all engage in projection to some extent, according to Narcissistic Personality clinical expert Dr. Martinez-Lewi, the projections of a narcissist are often [psychologically abusive](#). Rather than acknowledge their own flaws, imperfections and wrongdoings, malignant narcissists and sociopaths opt to dump their own traits on their unsuspecting suspects in a way that is painful and excessively cruel. Instead of admitting that self-improvement may be in order, they would prefer that their victims take responsibility for their behavior and feel ashamed of themselves. This is a way for a narcissist to project any toxic shame they have about themselves onto another.

For example, a person who engages in pathological lying may accuse their partner of fibbing; a needy spouse may call their husband "clingy" in an attempt to depict them as the one who is dependent; a rude employee may call their boss ineffective in an effort to escape the truth about their own productivity.

Narcissistic abusers love to play the "blameshifting game." Objectives of the game: they win, you lose, and you or the world at large is blamed for everything that's wrong with *them*. This way, you get to babysit their fragile ego while you're thrust into a sea of self-doubt. Fun, right?

Solution? Don't "project" your own sense of compassion or empathy onto a toxic person and don't own any of the toxic person's projections either. As manipulation expert and author Dr. George Simon (2010) notes in his book [In Sheep's Clothing](#), projecting our own conscience and value system onto others has the potential consequence of being met with further exploitation.

Narcissists on the extreme end of the spectrum usually have no interest in self-insight or change. It's important to cut ties and end interactions with toxic people as soon as possible so you can get centered in your own reality and validate your own identity. You don't have to live in someone else's cesspool of dysfunction.

3. Nonsensical conversations from hell.

If you think you're going to have a thoughtful discussion with someone who is toxic, be prepared for epic mindfuckery rather than conversational mindfulness.

[Malignant narcissists](#) and sociopaths use [word salad](#), [circular conversations](#), [ad hominem arguments](#), projection and gaslighting to disorient you and get you off track should you ever disagree with them or challenge them in any way. They do this in order to discredit, confuse and frustrate you, distract you from the main problem and make you feel guilty for being a human being with actual thoughts and feelings that

might differ from their own. In their eyes, *you* are the problem if you happen to exist.

Spend even ten minutes arguing with a toxic narcissist and you'll find yourself wondering how the argument even began at all. You simply disagreed with them about their absurd claim that the sky is red and now your entire childhood, family, friends, career and lifestyle choices have come under attack. That is because your disagreement picked at their false belief that they are omnipotent and omniscient, resulting in a [narcissistic injury](#).

Remember: toxic people don't argue with you, they essentially argue with themselves and you become privy to their long, draining monologues. They thrive off the drama and they live for it. Each and every time you attempt to provide a point that counters their ridiculous assertions, you feed them [supply](#). Don't feed the narcissists supply – rather, supply yourself with the confirmation that their abusive behavior is the problem, not you. Cut the interaction short as soon as you anticipate it escalating and use your energy on some decadent self-care instead.

4. Blanket statements and generalizations.

Malignant narcissists aren't always intellectual masterminds – many of them are intellectually lazy. Rather than taking the time to carefully consider a different perspective, they generalize anything and everything you say, making blanket statements that don't acknowledge the nuances in your argument or take into account the multiple perspectives you've paid homage to. Better yet, why not put a label on you that dismisses your perspective altogether?

On a larger scale, generalizations and blanket statements invalidate experiences that don't fit in the unsupported assumptions, schemas and stereotypes of society; they are also used to maintain the status quo. This form of digression exaggerates one perspective to the point where a social justice issue can become completely obscured. For example, rape accusations against well-liked figures are often met with the reminder that there are false reports of rape that occur. While those do occur, [they are rare](#), and in this case, the actions of one become labeled the behavior of the majority while the specific report itself remains unaddressed.

These everyday microaggressions also happen in toxic relationships. If you bring up to a narcissistic abuser that their behavior is unacceptable for example, they will often make blanket generalizations about your hypersensitivity or make a generalization such as, "You are *never* satisfied," or "You're *always* too sensitive" rather than addressing the real issues at hand. It's possible that you are oversensitive at times, but it is also possible that the abuser is also insensitive and cruel the majority of the time.

Hold onto your truth and resist generalizing statements by realizing that they are in fact forms of black and white illogical thinking. **Toxic people wielding blanket statements do not represent the full richness of experience – they represent the limited one of their singular experience and overinflated sense of self.**

5. Deliberately misrepresenting your thoughts and feelings to the point of absurdity.

In the hands of a malignant narcissist or sociopath, your differing opinions, legitimate emotions and lived experiences get translated into character flaws and evidence of your irrationality.

Narcissists weave tall tales to reframe what you're actually saying as a way to make your opinions look absurd or heinous. Let's say you bring up the fact that you're unhappy with the way a toxic friend is speaking to you. In response, he or she may put words in your mouth, saying, "Oh, so now *you're* perfect?" or "So I am a bad person, huh?" when you've done nothing but express your feelings. This enables them to invalidate your right to have thoughts and emotions about their inappropriate behavior and instills in you a sense of guilt when you attempt to establish boundaries.

This is also a popular form of diversion and cognitive distortion that is known as "[mind reading](#)." Toxic people often presume they know what you're thinking and feeling. They chronically jump to conclusions based on their own triggers rather than stepping back to evaluate the situation mindfully. They act accordingly based on their own delusions and fallacies and make no apologies for the harm they cause as a result. **Notorious for putting words in your mouth, they depict you as having an intention or outlandish viewpoint you didn't possess.** They accuse you of thinking of them as toxic – even before you've gotten the chance to call them out on their behavior – and this also serves as a form of preemptive defense.

Simply stating, "I never said that," and walking away should the person continue to accuse you of doing or saying something you didn't can help to set a firm boundary in this type of interaction. So long as the toxic person can blameshift and digress from their own behavior, they have succeeded in convincing you that you should be "shamed" for giving them any sort of realistic feedback.

6. Nitpicking and moving the goal posts.

The difference between constructive criticism and destructive criticism is the presence of a personal attack and impossible standards. These so-called "critics" often don't want to help you improve, they just want to nitpick, pull you down and scapegoat you in any way they can. Abusive narcissists and sociopaths employ a logical fallacy known as "[moving the goalposts](#)" in order to ensure that they have every reason to be perpetually dissatisfied with you. This is when, even after you've provided all the evidence in the world to validate your argument or taken an action to meet their request, they set up another expectation of you or demand more proof.

Do you have a successful career? The narcissist will then start to pick on why you aren't a multi-millionaire yet. Did you already fulfill their need to be excessively catered to? Now it's time to prove that you can also remain "independent." The goal posts will perpetually change and may not even be related to each other; they don't have any other point besides making you vie for the narcissist's approval and validation.

By raising the expectations higher and higher each time or switching them completely, highly manipulative and toxic people are able to instill in you a pervasive sense of unworthiness and of never feeling quite “enough.” By pointing out one irrelevant fact or one thing you did wrong and developing a hyperfocus on it, narcissists get to divert from your strengths and pull you into obsessing over any flaws or weaknesses instead. They get you thinking about the next expectation of theirs you’re going to have to meet – until eventually you’ve bent over backwards trying to fulfill their every need – only to realize it didn’t change the horrific way they treated you.

Don’t get sucked into nitpicking and changing goal posts – if someone chooses to rehash an irrelevant point over and over again to the point where they aren’t acknowledging the work you’ve done to validate your point or satisfy them, their motive isn’t to better understand. It’s to further provoke you into feeling as if you have to constantly prove yourself. Validate and approve of yourself. Know that you are enough and you don’t have to be made to feel constantly deficient or unworthy in some way.

7. Changing the subject to evade accountability.

This type of tactic is what I like to call the “What about me?” syndrome. It is a literal digression from the actual topic that works to redirect attention to a different issue altogether. Narcissists don’t want you to be on the topic of holding them accountable for anything, so they will reroute discussions to benefit them. Complaining about their neglectful parenting? They’ll point out a mistake you committed seven years ago. This type of diversion has no limits in terms of time or subject content, and often begins with a sentence like “What about the time when…”

On a macrolevel, these diversions work to derail discussions that challenge the status quo. A discussion about gay rights, for example, may be derailed quickly by someone who brings in another social justice issue just to distract people from the main argument.

As Tara Moss, author of *Speaking Out: A 21st Century Handbook for Women and Girls*, notes, specificity is needed in order to resolve and address issues appropriately – that doesn’t mean that the issues that are being brought up don’t matter, it just means that the specific time and place may not be the best context to discuss them.

Don’t be derailed – if someone pulls a switcheroo on you, you can exercise what I call the “broken record” method and continue stating the facts without giving in to their distractions. Redirect their redirection by saying, “That’s not what I am talking about. Let’s stay focused on the real issue.” If they’re not interested, disengage and spend your energy on something more constructive – like not having a debate with someone who has the mental age of a toddler.

8. Covert and overt threats.

Narcissistic abusers and otherwise toxic people feel very threatened when their [excessive sense of entitlement](#), false sense of superiority and grandiose sense of self are challenged in any way. They are prone to making unreasonable demands on others – while punishing you for not living up to their impossible to reach expectations.

Rather than tackle disagreements or compromises maturely, they set out to divert you from your right to have your own identity and perspective by attempting to instill fear in you about the consequences of disagreeing or complying with their demands. To them, any challenge results in an ultimatum and “do this or I’ll do that” becomes their daily mantra.

If someone’s reaction to you setting boundaries or having a differing opinion from your own is to threaten you into submission, whether it’s a thinly veiled threat or an overt admission of what they plan to do, this is a red flag of someone who has a high degree of entitlement and has no plans of compromising. Take threats seriously and show the narcissist you mean business; document threats and report them whenever possible and legally feasible.

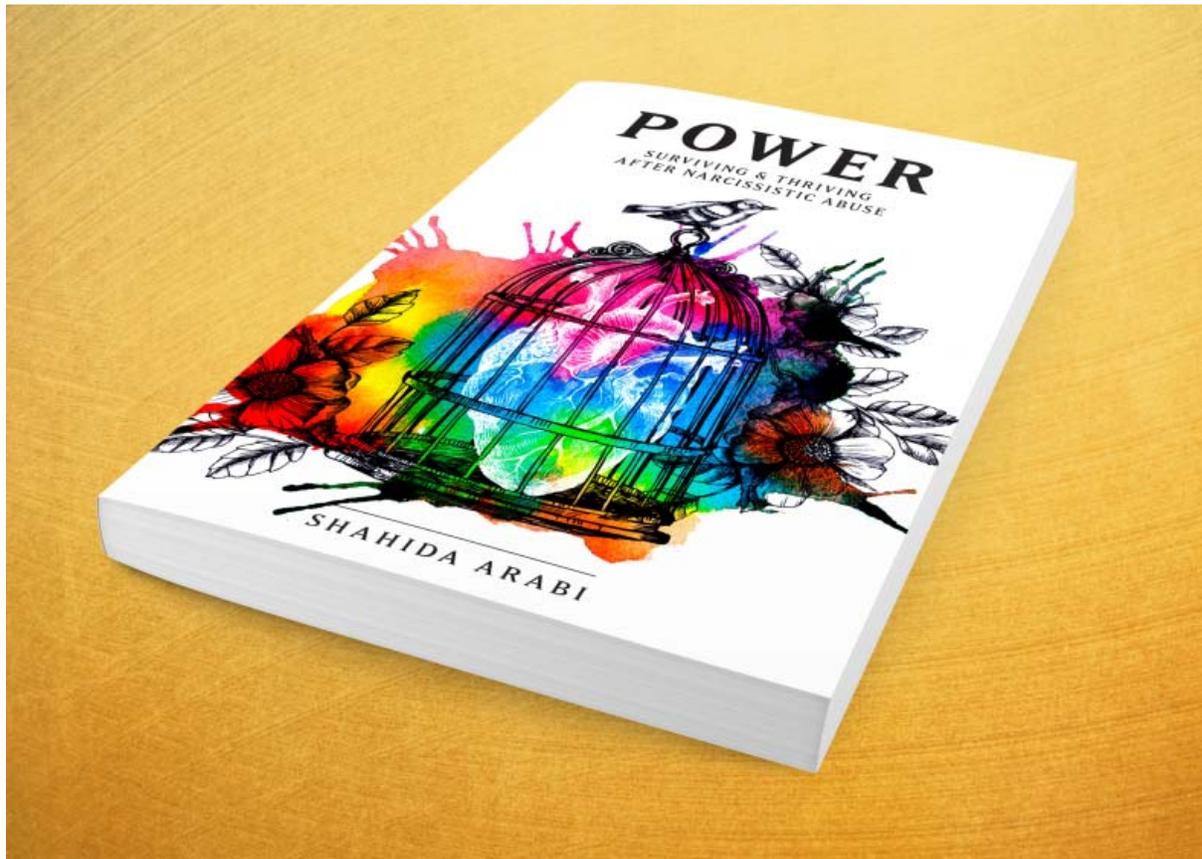
9. Name-calling.

Narcissists preemptively blow anything they perceive as a threat to their superiority out of proportion. In their world, only they can ever be right and anyone who dares to say otherwise creates a narcissistic injury that results in [narcissistic rage](#). As Mark Goulston, M.D. asserts, narcissistic rage does not result from low self-esteem but rather a high sense of entitlement and false sense of superiority.

The lowest of the low resort to narcissistic rage in the form of name-calling when they can’t think of a better way to manipulate your opinion or micromanage your emotions. Name-calling is a quick and easy way to put you down, degrade you and insult your intelligence, appearance or behavior while invalidating your right to be a separate person with a right to his or her perspective.

Name-calling can also be used to criticize your beliefs, opinions and insights. A well-researched perspective or informed opinion suddenly becomes “silly” or “idiotic” in the hands of a malignant narcissist or sociopath who feels threatened by it and cannot make a respectful, convincing rebuttal. Rather than target your argument, they target you as a person and seek to undermine your credibility and intelligence in any way they possibly can. It’s important to end any interaction that consists of name-calling and communicate that you won’t tolerate it. Don’t internalize it: realize that they are resorting to name-calling because they are deficient in higher level methods.

Want more writing about the narcissistic sociopath? Read the book [POWER: Surviving and Thriving After Narcissistic Abuse](#) by Shahida Arabi.



10. Destructive conditioning.

Toxic people condition you to associate your strengths, talents, and happy memories with abuse, frustration and disrespect. They do this by sneaking in covert and overt put-downs about the qualities and traits [they once idealized](#) as well as sabotaging your goals, ruining celebrations, vacations and holidays. They may even isolate you from your friends and family and make you financially dependent upon them. Like [Pavlov's dogs](#), you're essentially "trained" over time to become afraid of doing the very things that once made your life fulfilling.

Narcissists, sociopaths, psychopaths and otherwise toxic people do this because they wish to divert attention back to themselves and how you're going to please them. If there is anything outside of them that may threaten their control over your life, they seek to destroy it. They need to be the center of attention at all times. In the idealization phase, you were once the center of a narcissist's world – now the narcissist becomes the center of yours.

Narcissists are also naturally [pathologically envious](#) and don't want anything to come in between them and their influence over you. Your happiness represents everything they feel they cannot have in their emotionally shallow lives. After all, if you learn that you can get validation, respect and love from other sources besides the toxic person, what's to keep you from leaving them? To toxic people, a little conditioning can go a long way to keep you walking on eggshells and falling just short of your big dreams.

11. Smear campaigns and stalking.

When toxic types can't control the way you see yourself, they start to control how others see you; they play the martyr while you're labeled the toxic one. A smear campaign is a preemptive strike to sabotage your reputation and slander your name so that you won't have a support network to fall back on lest you decide to detach and cut ties with this toxic person. They may even stalk and harass you or the people you know as a way to supposedly "expose" the truth about you; this exposure acts as a way to hide their own abusive behavior while projecting it onto you.

Some smear campaigns can even work to pit two people or two groups against each other. A victim in an abusive relationship with a narcissist often doesn't know what's being said about them during the relationship, but they eventually find out the falsehoods shortly after they've been discarded.

Toxic people will gossip behind your back (and in front of your face), slander you to your loved ones or their loved ones, create stories that depict you as the aggressor while they play the victim, and claim that you engaged in the same behaviors that they are afraid you will accuse them of engaging in. They will also methodically, covertly and deliberately abuse you so they can use your reactions as a way to prove that they are the so-called "victims" of your abuse.

The best way to handle a smear campaign is to stay mindful of your reactions and stick to the facts. This is especially pertinent for high-conflict divorces with narcissists who may use your reactions to their provocations against you. Document any form of harassment, cyberbullying or stalking incidents and always speak to your narcissist through a lawyer whenever possible. You may wish to take legal action if you feel the stalking and harassment is getting out of control; finding a [lawyer who is well-versed](#) in Narcissistic Personality Disorder is crucial if that's the case. Your character and integrity will speak for itself when the narcissist's false mask begins to slip.

12. Love-bombing and devaluation.

Toxic people put you through an idealization phase until you're sufficiently hooked and invested in beginning a friendship or relationship with you. Then, they begin to devalue you while insulting the very things they admired in the first place. Another variation of this is when a toxic individual puts you on a pedestal while aggressively devaluing and attacking someone else who threatens their sense of superiority.

Narcissistic abusers do this all the time – they [devalue their exes](#) to their new partners, and eventually the new partner starts to receive the same sort of mistreatment as the narcissist's ex-partner. Ultimately what will happen is that you will also be on the receiving end of the same abuse. You will one day be the ex-partner they degrade to their new source of supply. You just don't know it yet. That's why it's important to stay mindful of the love-bombing technique whenever you witness behavior that doesn't

align with the saccharine sweetness a narcissist subjects you to.

As life coach Wendy Powell suggests, [slowing things down](#) with people you suspect may be toxic is an important way of combating the love-bombing technique. Be wary of the fact that how a person treats or speaks about someone else could potentially translate into the way they will treat you in the future.

13. Preemptive defense.

When someone stresses the fact that they are a “nice guy” or girl, that you should “trust them” right away or emphasizes their credibility without any provocation from you whatsoever, be wary.

Toxic and abusive people overstate their ability to be kind and compassionate. They often tell you that you should “trust” them without first building a solid foundation of trust. They may “perform” a high level of sympathy and empathy at the beginning of your relationship to dupe you, only to unveil their false mask later on. When you see their false mask begins to slip periodically during the devaluation phase of the abuse cycle, the true self is revealed to be terrifyingly cold, callous and contemptuous.

Genuinely nice people rarely have to persistently show off their positive qualities – they exude their warmth more than they talk about it and they know that actions speak volumes more than mere words. They know that trust and respect is a two-way street that requires reciprocity, not repetition.

To counter a preemptive defense, reevaluate why a person may be emphasizing their good qualities. Is it because they think you don’t trust them, or because they know you shouldn’t? Trust actions more than empty words and see how someone’s actions communicate who they are, not who they say they are.

14. Triangulation.

Bringing in the opinion, perspective or suggested threat of another person into the dynamic of an interaction is known as “[triangulation](#).” Often used to validate the toxic person’s abuse while invalidating the victim’s reactions to abuse, triangulation can also work to manufacture love triangles that leave you feeling unhinged and insecure.

Malignant narcissists love to triangulate their significant other with strangers, co-workers, ex-partners, friends and even family members in order to evoke jealousy and uncertainty in you. They also use the opinions of others to validate their point of view.

This is a diversionary tactic meant to pull your attention away from their abusive behavior and into a false image of them as a desirable, sought after person. It also leaves you questioning yourself – if Mary did agree with Tom, doesn’t that mean that you must be wrong? The truth is, narcissists love to “report back” falsehoods about others say about you, when in fact, they are the ones smearing you.

To resist triangulation tactics, realize that whoever the narcissist is triangulating with is also being triangulated by your relationship with the narcissist as well. Everyone is essentially being played by this one person. Reverse “triangulate” the narcissist by gaining support from a third party that is not under the narcissist’s influence – and also by seeking your own validation.

15. Bait and feign innocence.

Toxic individuals lure you into a false sense of security simply to have a platform to showcase their cruelty. Baiting you into a mindless, chaotic argument can escalate into a showdown rather quickly with someone who doesn’t know the meaning of respect. A simple disagreement may bait you into responding politely initially, until it becomes clear that the person has a malicious motive of tearing you down.

By “baiting” you with a seemingly innocuous comment disguised as a rational one, they can then begin to play with you. Remember: [narcissistic abusers](#) have learned about your insecurities, the unsettling catchphrases that interrupt your confidence, and the disturbing topics that reenact your wounds – and they use this knowledge maliciously to provoke you. After you’ve fallen for it, hook line and sinker, they’ll stand back and innocently ask whether you’re “okay” and talk about how they didn’t “mean” to agitate you. This faux innocence works to catch you off guard and make you believe that they truly didn’t intend to hurt you, until it happens so often you can’t deny the reality of their malice any longer.

It helps to realize when you’re being baited so you can avoid engaging altogether. Provocative statements, name-calling, hurtful accusations or unsupported generalizations, for example, are common baiting tactics. Your gut instinct can also tell you when you’re being baited – if you feel “off” about a certain comment and continue to feel this way even after it has been expanded on, that’s a sign you may need to take some space to reevaluate the situation before choosing to respond.

16. Boundary testing and hoovering.

Narcissists, sociopaths and otherwise toxic people continually try and test your boundaries to see which ones they can trespass. The more violations they’re able to commit without consequences, the more they’ll push the envelope.

That’s why survivors of emotional as well as physical abuse often experience even more severe incidents of abuse each and every time they go back to their abusers.

[Abusers](#) tend to “hoover” their victims back in with sweet promises, fake remorse and empty words of how they are going to change, only to abuse their victims even more horrifically. In the abuser’s sick mind, this boundary testing serves as a punishment for standing up to the abuse and also for being going back to it. When narcissists try to press the emotional reset button, reinforce your boundaries even more strongly rather than backtracking on them.

Remember – highly manipulative people don't respond to empathy or compassion. They respond to consequences.

17. Aggressive jabs disguised as jokes.

Covert narcissists enjoy making malicious remarks at your expense. These are usually dressed up as “just jokes” so that they can get away with saying appalling things while still maintaining an innocent, cool demeanor. Yet any time you are outraged at an insensitive, harsh remark, you are accused of having no sense of humor. This is a tactic frequently used in [verbal abuse](#).

The contemptuous smirk and sadistic gleam in their eyes gives it away, however – like a predator that plays with its food, a toxic person gains pleasure from hurting you and being able to get away with it. After all, it's just a joke, right? Wrong. It's a way to gaslight you into thinking their abuse is a joke – a way to divert from their cruelty and onto your perceived sensitivity. It is important that when this happens, you stand up for yourself and make it clear that you won't tolerate this type of behavior.

Calling out manipulative people on their covert put-downs may result in further gaslighting from the abuser but maintain your stance that their behavior is not okay and end the interaction immediately if you have to.

18. Condescending sarcasm and patronizing tone.

Belittling and degrading a person is a toxic person's forte and their tone of voice is only one tool in their toolbox. [Sarcasm](#) can be a fun mode of communication when both parties are engaged, but narcissists use it chronically as a way to manipulate you and degrade you. If you in any way react to it, you must be “too sensitive.”

Forget that the toxic person constantly has temper tantrums every time their big bad ego is faced with realistic feedback – the victim is the hypersensitive one, apparently. So long as you're treated like a child and constantly challenged for expressing yourself, you'll start to develop a sense of hypervigilance about voicing your thoughts and opinions without reprimand. This self-censorship enables the abuser to put in less work in silencing you, because you begin to silence yourself.

Whenever you are met with a condescending demeanor or tone, call it out firmly and assertively. You don't deserve to be spoken down to like a child – nor should you ever silence yourself to meet the expectation of someone else's superiority complex.

19. [Shaming](#).

“You should be ashamed of yourself” is a favorite saying of toxic people. Though it can be used by

someone who is non-toxic, in the realm of the narcissist or sociopath, shaming is an effective method that targets any behavior or belief that might challenge a toxic person's power. It can also be used to destroy and whittle away at a victim's self-esteem: if a victim dares to be proud of something, shaming the victim for that specific trait, quality or accomplishment can serve to diminish their sense of self and stifle any pride they may have.

Malignant narcissists, sociopaths and psychopaths enjoy using your own wounds against you – so they will even shame you about any abuse or injustice you've suffered in your lifetime as a way to retraumatize you. Were you a childhood abuse survivor? A malignant narcissist or sociopath will claim that you must've done something to deserve it, or brag about their own happy childhood as a way to make you feel deficient and unworthy. What better way to injure you, after all, than to pick at the original wound? As [surgeons of madness](#), they seek to exacerbate wounds, not help heal them.

If you suspect you're dealing with a toxic person, avoid revealing any of your vulnerabilities or past traumas. Until they've proven their character to you, there is no point disclosing information that could be potentially used against you.

20. Control.

Most importantly, toxic abusers love to maintain control in whatever way they can. They isolate you, maintain control over your finances and social networks, and micromanage every facet of your life. Yet the most powerful mechanism they have for control is toying with your emotions.

That's why abusive narcissists and sociopaths manufacture situations of conflict out of thin air to keep you feeling off center and off balanced. That's why they chronically engage in disagreements about irrelevant things and rage over perceived slights. That's why they emotionally withdraw, only to re-idealize you once they start to lose control. That's why they vacillate between their false self and their true self, so you never get a sense of psychological safety or certainty about who your partner truly is.

The more power they have over your emotions, the less likely you'll trust your own reality and the truth about the abuse you're enduring. Knowing the manipulative tactics and how they work to erode your sense of self can arm you with the knowledge of what you're facing and at the very least, develop a plan

to regain control over your own life and away from toxic people.



Shahida Arabi is the author of the book *POWER: Surviving and Thriving After Narcissistic Abuse*, available [here](#).

