

#1 Narcissism Doctor: Toxic Signs You're Dealing With A Narcissist Causing Trauma & Disease | Ramani Durvasula x Dhru Purohit

Introduction. Toxic relationships and their impact on life expectancy

Dhru Purohit

00:00:00 — There's something shocking that's decreasing people's lifespan that most people actually don't know about and it has a lot to do with the toxic people in their lives. We know from the longest study on happiness ever conducted by Harvard University that the happiest and longest living people have strong and supportive relationships. You're the world's foremost expert in narcissism. You've shared that narcissistic and toxic people will literally take years off our lives.

00:00:27 — Before we dive into the top signs of how to identify the narcissistic and toxic people around us. Can you talk about why we should all care about this topic if we care about longevity?

Ramani Durvasula

00:00:38 — Yeah. I think actually exposure to toxic and narcissistic relationships may be the public health issue of our time. I really, really do.

We talk about sleep. We talk about exercise and movement. We talk about diet. We talk about preventative healthcare. But I am telling you now, and I would stake my reputation on this, for the people I've worked with—and there are thousands at this point, hundreds of thousands—who are navigating really toxic, difficult, invalidating, manipulative relationships, if you just lifted that thing out of their life, their health would improve almost instantaneously.

I promise you that. It would put years on their lives.

Their health would improve, their engagement in health behaviors would improve, their sleep would improve, their sense of meaning and purpose would improve. Every single predictor of health and wellness would skyrocket almost immediately.

00:01:36 — I know that the Surgeon General, for example, made a lot of his focus on loneliness, the loneliness epidemic. And while I agree with that, I think that that's a big issue, I still think it leaves this undiscussed area that I feel that the fields of medicine, psychiatry, and mental health won't take on, which is, what is the toll of a toxic relationship?

Nobody's talking about it, but I can tell you now that the change, and I can give you end-of-one research here, in that one case in particular, a woman was having to wear some kind of orthopedic device and was having a lot of trouble healing from an orthopedic surgery, and even the doctors were flummoxed. Why is this going

so badly? Why is this going so badly? During the course of the recovery, It was taking years. A narcissistic relationship was removed from her life. Inside of a week, that brace came off of her.

The Impact of Chronic Stress from Narcissistic Relationships on Health

00:02:27 — She's like, 'It's so,' and she said, 'I didn't put the two and two together.' She said, 'It's so weird, I'm feeling better.'

And she's like, 'In five days, I think I could try this.' And she said, 'It was like years of no movement. And then there was movement.'

And think about it. When we think about what happens to a person under chronic stress, we see cortisol. We see other neurohormones being released. We see inflammatory issues. We see greater propensity for issues like depression. We see problems in the gut microbiome and deleterious effects on health there.

00:02:56 — We see dermatologic issues, we see cardiovascular issues when people are under stress. And what we know is that interpersonal stress may be one of the most challenging kinds of stress, right? Because it's often inescapable. When it comes to narcissistic relationships, it really is, it's narcissistic bosses. When it's a narcissistic marriage, narcissistic family members.

00:03:19 — And so I can't put too fine a point on this when I say I think this is the public health issue of our time.

Dhru Purohit

00:03:25 — That's pretty mind-blowing to hear it that way. And even before we hit record, we were chit-chatting a little bit. You said that it's literally taking years off of people's lives.

Ramani Durvasula

00:03:36 — I am seeing people, I've seen multiple patients who didn't really have the genetics for the cancers they got. And the course of the cancer was far more virulent than even their oncologist thought it would be. Over and over, we see this. I was talking with a team of rheumatologists in Egypt who said, you know, we have two groups of patients. One group of patients that really improves on medication and the other group, we just can't get, we can't get improvement.

00:04:03 — And you know what the difference was? They did sort of a straw poll survey. They found that the people who were not improving under best practices regimens, we're the ones in toxic relationships. All the stuff we know, medication, treatment, call it what you will, this is where Western medicine hits the wall because we don't ask about this. We don't address this. Or we think, ah, relationships are tough. No, actually relationships aren't tough.

00:04:29 — These relationships are tough. And when you throw in there, let's just put chronic health in there, chronic health issues that a person might be having. A narcissistic person in that relationship is more likely to invalidate their experience. I noticed much higher rates of autoimmune processes, autoimmune illnesses, call them what you will, in people who are in narcissistic relationships over and over and over again. And not only are they invalidated by their partners and their families, often by the healthcare entire enterprise.

00:05:00 — So they're constantly being gaslighted by systems. They're often not helped. They're often still having to do the vast majority of stuff in a household or around child rearing. They're completely unsupported. There's no one sort of supporting their adherence to health care regimens. These are people who are chronically chronically not only swimming upstream They're swimming upstream while people are throwing rocks at them. So it is a so years absolutely, it's years because this amount of stress is it is.

00:05:30 — The body never gets a chance to rest on.

Dhru Purohit

00:05:34 — On one hand, it's taking years off of people's lives, especially most likely disproportionately affecting women.

Ramani Durvasula

00:05:43 — It does disproportionately affect women, but I do want to put, I do want to say that not all narcissistic people are men. And I have worked with many, many men who are in narcissistic relationships, came from narcissistic families of origin. They're experiencing the same negative health effects, but there are more narcissistic men than women and women have less power in society. So, if they're in one of these relationships, they may be on the wrong end of the stick in terms of having to manage, you know, caregiving duties, maybe not having the same kind of financial power, stuff around family court can get really wonky.

00:06:14 — And then when you have intersectional factors, ethnic minority status, plus gender, plus lower social class or lower access to resources, then these relationships can get all the more harmful.

Dhru Purohit

00:06:26 — So, on one side you have it's taking years off of people's lives and on another side you have an entire sort of medical-industrial complex and also a therapeutic-industrial complex, because you're also talking about how a lot of therapists don't have the courage or the lack of awareness.

Ramani Durvasula

00:06:45 — Yes.

Dhru Purohit

00:06:46 — In fact, which one is it? Why is this going on? Is it lack of courage? Is it lack of training? Is it lack of awareness that people are not tackling this?

Ramani Durvasula

00:06:50 — I think it's all of the above. I think that there's a real resistance to this. I'm struck by the real resistance to this, that this very simple education. I said, listen, I'm not telling you that I meet someone in 15 minutes and I'm like, well, your wife's a narcissist. I listened to their story, I listened to the patterns. You know, we have some sort of, it's interesting, I trained as a therapist in the 90s, right? So we don't have the same kind of, we didn't have the same kind of digital tools then as we do now.

00:07:16 — Many of my clients, patients will show me text messages, sequences of text messages, emails, play voicemails and things like that. It's unmistakable, it's very clear what they're up against and they're not making it up because they couldn't have made up an entire text sequence, right? So I'm seeing it right in front of me what these folks are up against. And repeatedly, repeatedly, couples therapy is a great example. The couples therapist seems so invested in making the point like, what are both of you bringing in? Well, let's see.

00:07:46 — How about maybe one of them, one person is trying to play chess and one's trying to play checkers. One person's looking to fight, the other one's looking to affiliate. One person wants power, dominance, and control, the other one wants closeness. This is not a fair fight. And so that kind of resistance, and in fact, I've had many, many patients come in, literally almost need to be deprogrammed from therapists who say, oh, don't talk about that narcissism stuff.

00:08:10 — You have no right to call them that. Maybe it's your problem. Maybe you're the one who's to blame. Maybe, I mean, as recently-

Dhru Purohit

00:08:17 — It's a both side thing.

Ramani Durvasula

00:08:17 — So it's always a both. It takes two to tango. Not really, not really. Not when one person is using actually what I would really call psychologically dirty tricks.

When you have two people in a relationship, and one person's really invested in wanting to maintain attachment, connection, closeness—that they're coming from a place of empathy and integrity and reciprocity—and the other person is coming from a place of power, domination, control, egocentricity, self-centeredness, and will do anything to make sure that the whole relationship is about them.

How is that person who's holding a stance that is more empathic, that is more connected, not having the same relationship?

And so short of people having paperwork that they put on a table when they enter a relationship and saying, Hey, this is what I really want in a relationship, which narcissistic people walk around thinking they're empathic, warm, nice people.

00:09:08 — So then you have that triple confusion that these are, it's not like the narcissistic person says, Hey, you just met me and I'm a handful and I am not a nice person. They think they're good people and so do a lot of people in the world. So it gets very confusing very quickly for people in this relationship, and I will say this for all my days. What this is doing to people's health Because I've seen what happens when we remove the narcissistic person the person leaves the job their health Improves and it's not because they're not working.

00:09:39 — It's because they're not or that or they go to a new workplace. That's a better example. They go to a different department in the workplace they go to a different, literally a different employer, they're not working with someone like that, and they're thriving. Same person, the narcissistic people were removed. They'll say, after about a month living in my own apartment without the narcissist around, my health improved. When I stopped talking with my family, my health improved significantly.

00:10:03 — And I think of all my clients, and I have to be frank with you, we muddle through week over week, we talk about what's happening with them, we put together, we put Band-Aids on all the injustices they experience. But in my heart of hearts, I know, if those relationships were not in their lives, they wouldn't need me anymore.

Dhru Purohit

00:10:22 — Wow. You know, you mentioned an important word, and it's the reason that we brought you here. You mentioned the word confusion. There's a lot of confusion around this topic, and I really see you as a voice of bringing people clarity, also a sense of letting people know you're not crazy. You know, literally the topic of the title of your book is it's not you right letting people know it's not you So part of that confusion is that at the very basics and at the foundation.

00:10:52 — Many people actually don't even know what is a narcissist correct?

Ramani Durvasula

00:10:56 — Yes. No, they don't and so let's start there. Let's start with basics a. Narcissistic person is a person with a narcissistic personality disorder. They do not necessarily have a disorder. They do not necessarily have a personality disorder or everyone's got a personality. You've got one, I've got one. Everyone listening has got one. That doesn't mean we have disorders. It means we have personalities. All human beings have got them.

00:11:21 — And a narcissistic personality is characterized by variable, low, shallow, transactional empathy, entitlement, grandiosity, arrogance, self-centeredness, sort of a selfishness and egocentricity, very poor frustration tolerance. If things don't go their way, They will react very, very angrily. There is a really thin-skinned sensitivity. They cannot bear up against any form of criticism, any form of feedback. They tend to envy other people or think other people envy them.

00:11:53 — Narcissistic people often view themselves as a victim. If things don't go their way, it feels like the world's unjustifiably coming after them. But if the same thing happened to someone else, they would not frame it that way. But I'd have to say if we had to pick one strand that defines narcissism, it's that entitlement. Now, all of the stuff I'm talking about, the entitlement, the grandiosity, the arrogance, all of it, these are defenses, they're grandiose defenses against a very core sense of insecurity and shame.

00:12:20 — That's what's percolating, it's bubbling, it's like what's under the earth's crust. We don't see that all the time, but it's there. So anything that activates that shame, like they don't get the promotion, they don't get the sports car they want, their girlfriend breaks up with them, then we see that comes out as anger, whereas other people when they experience shame might experience sadness, they might experience guilt, the narcissistic person turns that into anger. So these are very antagonistic relationships.

00:12:46 — And the narcissistic person needs lots of supply. They need, they have an excessive need for praise and admiration. So they're going out there all the time getting it any way they can. Now that means different things to different people. For some people, narcissistic supplies money. For some people, it's power. Or for some people it's likes on social media, for some people it's status, depends on the person. And so they're gonna go out and get that and they'll often get that from other people.

00:13:11 — So that's what a narcissist is. Narcissism is on a continuum. At the low end, it's emotional immaturity, emotional stuntedness. It's a, again, that constant selfish need for admiration and validation. Their relationships don't go deep. I'd say at that low end of narcissism, it's annoying. You certainly wouldn't want to be raising kids with this person, you wouldn't have wanted to be raised by this person. But to anyone else, it might be sort of annoying, maybe at times harmless.

00:13:40 — Now, when you get to the far end of that continuum, to the severe end of narcissism, you're talking about malignant, exploitative, severely manipulative, isolating, coercive narcissism. Now we're talking about something dangerous. Obviously, that low and high end, the people in those relationships are having very different experiences. There are also multiple subtypes of narcissism. And all this heterogeneity means that different people in different narcissistic relationships are sometimes having different experiences.

00:14:05 — But the core experience of a person in a narcissistic relationship is oftentimes confusion, self-blame, and rumination.

Dhru Purohit

00:14:13 — You know, one of the mind-blowing things that I first understood from watching your content on this topic, which was like a light bulb moment for me, is I used to think that narcissism was more on the rare side. I actually would be even very careful about sort of even tossing the word around because I thought, oh, that person might be just going through their journey. But something I learned from you and your work is that, you know, there are no exact stats, but your estimate is at about 15%-ish of the population.

Ramani Durvasula

00:14:42 — Yeah, 10 to 15. I would say 10 to 15. I think at 15, we've got all of it, very low to very high. I think at 10, we're probably 10%, 1 in 10, we're probably capturing people who are narcissistic enough that it causes damage in close relationships, causes damage in workplaces, it causes damage in family relationships.

The Struggle to Identify Narcissism in Relationships

Dhru Purohit

00:14:59 — Well, before we go a little bit further, because that's quite a higher number than I think a lot of people estimate, even if they have somebody in their life that is, they suspect to be a narcissist that is causing them damage and taking years off their life. One of the first questions when I was telling somebody. I'm doing this interview and how excited I was, they were saying, how do you spot one? Do I know if this individual in my life is actually a narcissist?

00:15:26 — How do you spot somebody?

Ramani Durvasula

00:15:27 — It takes time. I think people want sort of the narcissism test. They want to be able to figure it out a few times after they meet someone. I'm going to be frank with you. Even a therapist, even a good shrink, it might take us 8 to 12 weeks in a room with them. It doesn't pop out immediately, especially because narcissistic people aren't coming for therapy to get help with their narcissism. They're often coming in because of something else that's going on in their lives. So we're not sort of looking for that right away.

00:15:52 — And so we ourselves as therapists almost have to pay attention to, 'Why don't I look forward to seeing this client?'

'What is it about that puts me on my back foot with this client?'

'Why aren't they getting better?'

'Why is it that everything in their life seems to be going wrong every single time?'
Right?

And I'll always, you know, people will say, 'How do you know?'

Because anyone can come into therapy and say, 'There's a narcissist in my life.'

And I said, 'What's interesting is that the people who are really being harmed by narcissistic people, they don't tend to come in and say, a narcissistic person's harming me.'

00:16:23 — They come in and say, I'm really confused and I'm upside down and I just can't make sense of what's happening. A narcissistic person will come in almost right away and be punching out about being a victim. Everything's against them, nothing's working out for them. But there's usually a stimulus event that will bring them in. Got fired from a job, it's optics therapy, they're being sent, for some, you gotta get into therapy, it's ultimatum therapy, someone's forcing them into therapy, or it's a co-occurring condition.

00:16:48 — So they either have depression, addiction, something else is happening, and that other thing is what brought them into therapy. And then, it will take us a while to sort of dig. So that's a therapist who's literally got binoculars on the situation, staring at it. So what that means, and I have to say, a lot of folks in intimate relationships will say it took them somewhere between one and two years to really spot the narcissism, they'll say. Because again, the early part of a narcissistic relationship is often very idealized, very seductive, fun and exciting.

00:17:15 — In fact, a lot of people will say this is the most interesting, compelling, exciting relationship. Because for that whole laundry list I gave you—low empathy, entitlement, grandiosity, arrogance, all that icky stuff—narcissistic people are also very charming, compelling, confident, clever, and above all else, charismatic. So you have these really charismatic, engaging people. People aren't looking for the problems there. And when they do come up, people either blame themselves or say, 'Oh, it's just a bad day; everyone has off days.'

And the excuses start to pile up. Most clients I've worked with, it was usually somewhere between eight months and two years where they're like, 'Oh boy.' And the problem between eight months and two years is you can be pretty deep in. You might have already moved in with each other. You might have gotten engaged. You might have gotten married. You might have a child on the way. Now you're sunk because getting out of these relationships is no small task.

And the other tricky piece of narcissistic relationships is they aren't all bad days, right?

00:18:10 — So this is not like you're getting into a relationship where it's a love bombing and then it's terrible. I always say it's sort of like a slow titration down. After the love bombing phase is done and the devaluation phase starts, it's still about 90% good and 10% bad. Then it's 80% good, 20% bad, 70, 30, 60, 40. At the 50-50 point, now we're in a process we call trauma bonding, that the confusion of the intermittent reinforcement, the good days and the bad days, the good days and the bad days.

00:18:38 — And in that structure, people don't want the relationship to go away. They want it to improve. And they're like, 'Well, there are these good days. How can we make it so it's all good days, right? It's not all bad.'

So they start blaming themselves. The person in the relationship blames themselves.

'Maybe if I do this, maybe if I say it this way, maybe if I don't say it this way, maybe if I try this, maybe if I keep the house perfectly clean, maybe if I make sure everyone's happy at the holiday, maybe if I stay late every night at work.'

Whatever it is, the person starts taking on more and more responsibility.

Narcissism and Trauma Bonding

Ramani Durvasula

00:19:07 — Maybe if I'm quieter, maybe if I don't complain. By the time we get to 10% good, 90% bad, people are really stuck, but now they're really trauma-bonded. They can't figure out what's going on. This is where the confusion becomes a real issue. And other challenges, narcissistic people tend to treat those closest to them, spouses, children, maybe people who are sort of don't have as much power in them in the workplace as them in the workplace.

00:19:32 — What you'll see is that they'll treat them the worst.

So, the world is still seeing the charming, charismatic, compelling person, 'You're so lucky to be married to them,' 'Oh my gosh, your father's amazing.'

And the person's like, 'Oh my gosh, it's got to be me, it's not you, it's got to be me because everyone thinks they're great.'

And then people will also say, they almost feel physiologically stuck to the narcissistic person because it is so confusing.

00:19:55 — And lots of folks will say, 'Intellectually, I know this isn't good for me at this point, but physiologically I'm struggling. I feel a sense of panic at the idea of getting out.'

The Slot Machine Analogy: Addiction to Narcissistic Relationships

And it's really kind of a slot machine sequence because after a person's put five hundred dollars into a slot machine, maybe they've won a hundred back. You still can't get them to walk away. Why? Why don't people walk away from slot machines?

Dhru Purohit

00:20:16 — Because they are addicted.

Ramani Durvasula

Addicted to what?

Dhru Purohit

They're addicted to the. Unpredictability and that's something good might come

Ramani Durvasula

And what's the good?

Dhru Purohit

And the good is a return payout cash.

Ramani Durvasula

00:20:29 — Big cash. Not just a cash payout, like not a \$20. They're holding out for the million dollars. They still think it's going to come, right? \$500 in, they're starting to use their ATM card, take the money out. That's the psychological equivalent of giving up on yourself, right? So I'm going to keep getting more money out. I'm going to keep playing this. So people don't want to walk away because they might hit the jackpot. But there's a second reason people don't walk away from the slot machine. What is that? After they've been paying it for four hours, put hundreds of dollars in it.

00:20:54 — Maybe they want \$100 back. They're \$400 in the hole. Why don't they walk away?

Dhru Purohit

00:20:58 — I've put in too much to walk away. They don't want to cut their losses. They're afraid, is that right?

Ramani Durvasula

00:21:03 — Kind of, but there's something more. A lot of people don't get this. Tell me, tell me, yes. They don't want someone else to get it. Someone's going to come to this machine and they're going to reap my investments.

Dhru Purohit

00:21:12 — I've heard you share this before.

Ramani Durvasula

00:21:14 — This is fascinating.

Dhru Purohit

00:21:15 — The idea that even in a relationship that you've put up with this person so long, you've made them better, maybe even dragged them to therapy or coaching or something, and maybe finally they'll improve, but then somebody else will get the better version of that.

Ramani Durvasula

00:21:27 — And I tell them, I tell my client, 'There's no jackpot, this machine is rigged. You're never going to get more than maybe 25 bucks out of it, right?'

'And so if those \$25 payouts are working for you...'

And my point of view and my approach with clients, with anyone, is that the whole idea of healing is building up individuation and an autonomous self that makes their own choices.

00:21:53 — And to that end, I never tell anyone they have to leave. Not everyone can leave. Some people have minor children. There might be financial reasons. They say cultural or religious reasons. They say stay out of a sense of duty or obligation. Not everyone can leave every narcissistic relationship.

So part of the work then is finding the workarounds if you can't fully get out. But more than anything, it's radical acceptance of what this relationship is really about, and there will never be a jackpot.

Dhru Purohit

00:22:17 — Mmm, you know taking that analogy of the casino, you know, what is the goal of casino? It's to take all your money the house always wins right the house always wins slot machines are rigged. From the get-go including most games except a little bit poker, but most games are gonna be rigged. So the goal of a casino is to take your money. What is the goal of a narcissist?

Ramani Durvasula

00:22:38 — So I'd say that in this year in your analogy the casino is society. That is selling people a bad bill of goods on relationships so much of why relationships work out as luck.

I really believe that you know the bad luck of getting into like you're young you meet someone, you pick someone, you think they're nice, they're not nice, and then it's hard to get out of the relationship, right?

So there's a bit of luck. So when people talk about how successful their marriages are, I often read it and go, ooh, there's a lot of luck, and there's a lot of luck in this one.

00:23:04 — And so, but, but that said, that I do think the casino is society that's selling people like, there could be a jackpot, keep trying, try harder, stay longer.

Winners don't quit. Winners don't, yeah, you know, yeah, just keep going, make it work, keep going. And so people, that's society giving people the message of stay in the casino, right? And so what's the slot machine trend?

Slot machine's just being the slot machine, right? It's just taking your stuff. It's taking and it's taking, and every so often it's giving you a little bit, and it's taking and it's giving a little bit.

00:23:36 — You might wonder, does anyone ever get the jackpot? I've never met anyone who's ever won a jackpot in a slot machine. I'm sure they're out there, but they are unicorns, right?

And they're not normative. And so I think that in this scenario, the narcissistic person exists to get validation and supply and they don't care. I think it's the not caring that's hard for people to get through their heads. Like the narcissistic person doesn't really care that you're hurt right now.

00:24:00 — If anything, they're irritated that you're hurt because now they have to deal with it or that's leading them to feel some sense of shame. And then they're going to yell at you and tell you, you're being too sensitive.

Don't be ridiculous. I didn't really say anything that bad. Big deal. You found a text on my phone with someone I work with. And that's how that plays out. They leave the other person feeling crazy.

Dhru Purohit

00:24:20 — There's this idea in the work of Eckhart Tolle, he calls it the pain body, if you've ever heard of it. Is that useful here in our understanding of what the motivation is of a narcissist that you have this energy ball of somebody, the ego, the dark shadow side of them that can only stay alive with constant sort of stimulation at the extremes.

00:24:44 — And so that a Narcissist needs this negativity in their lives to keep them going, to keep their idea existing?

Ramani Durvasula

00:24:52 — It's not negativity for them. They're getting praise. They're getting validation. They're getting people telling them great. They might be having sex with three different people. I'm not missing the negativity part for them.

Patterns of Behavior in Long-Term Narcissistic Relationships

Dhru Purohit

So a better way to ask it is that, are narcissists happy?

Ramani Durvasula

That's a really tough question to answer. No, there's a constant sense of unsettledness. And I was playing with you. I agree with the sense of a pain body with a darkness, right? That I would rather not to be a narcissist.

00:25:18 — I'd probably be a hell of a lot more successful if I was, but I'd rather not because there's a constant yearning. It's never enough for a narcissistic person. They can have the riches of the world at their feet, a devoted partner, beautiful, wonderful children, a kind people they work with, and that's not enough. It has to be the next thing, the next thing, the next thing. Like it's like this big consuming beast that is the narcissistic person's psyche.

00:25:43 — So there's an unsettledness to them. I think narcissistic people can be happy in a moment.

So a narcissistic person goes into a restaurant, they get to the restaurant, and the host says, 'Oh my gosh, you're such a gorgeous couple. We are giving you the best table in the house because we want everyone to see you.'

And then they send a bottle of champagne, and the chef sends a free course, and the narcissistic person, they're happy that night because they feel like they're getting all this validation that they deserve.

00:26:12 — And that on that for those moments, when it's all the stars are lining up, they're happy. However, I say that with an asterisk, because underlying that is, well, the next time we come here, it's not going to be like this. So there's always that sense of it's going to be taken away. I'm not going to stay at the top of this completely. I remember being at a celebrity event once many, many narcissistic people there.

00:26:36 — These people had more stuff than I could conceive of in 27 lifetimes.

I'm looking at the homes and the cars and the dresses and the hair and the jewels, and there was an emptiness. I'm thinking, 'This is never gonna be enough for these people.'

They were in the midst of something so lavish that I remember saying, 'I've got to sketch this onto my memory because I'll never be in something like this again.'

And they were so blasé about it, but there was an anxiety, a tension.

00:27:02 — So they can't be in that moment. I don't know how much you know Dr. Keltner's work out of Berkeley. This idea is amazing work. I love his work because it's this idea on being awestruck and this idea of awe as being a healing energy. And awe is not about the Grand Canyon. It could be a bumblebee sort of pollinating a flower and you see the little bits of yellow on its little dancing butt. And it's beautiful.

00:27:25 — I have hummingbirds that come to my house and you just stare at them, like, how is that? How is that color of the hummingbirds throat, even something in nature, the narcissistic person can't get there. So they miss some of these really incredibly human experiences, right? Or if they're there, they're so focused on getting

the selfie, that they're not even present with the awe inducing thing that's in front of them. And so they're missing out on a lot of the human experience. So I don't actually think they're happy.

00:27:54 — But I believe happiness is a subjective state. So at any given moment, they might say, I'm happy, everything going my way.

The Narcissist's Periodic Moments of Happiness

Dhru Purohit

00:28:01 — You know, we're going to get into this whole bunch of topics, including how to protect ourselves and what to do if you can't leave.

As you mentioned, there are some people that are in a situation—kids might be involved, could be a business partnership, whatever it might be—that some people have to stay long-term. It could be a family member that you have to be involved with in some way, but you're trying to minimize your contact with them or how deep your relationship goes.

But I think a big part of getting to that place—and we'll get there—is first even understanding the motivation or the origin story of somebody who is a narcissist.

00:28:38 — So you mentioned something before you mentioned that there are these wounds that drive and sort of settled this behavior. So do all narcissists have some original kind of either individual childhood wound or combination of wounds that led to who they are?

Ramani Durvasula

00:28:56 — I would say, yeah. I mean, I do believe narcissistic people are wounded people.

The second path I'm about to tell you may not register as a wound initially, but it is—many narcissistic people have a backstory characterized by adversity. Now, to create an antagonistic personality like narcissism, you usually need a biological temperament in place.

So every child, every baby comes into the world with a temperament, which is why in one family, the mother will recall, the parents will recall, these were three very different babies, right?

But they are babies growing up, born to the same mother, born to the same parents, growing up in the same household, right?

So that temperament matters. And it's temperaments that are more high demand, difficult to soothe, don't regulate well, very attention-seeking, very externalizing—those are often the temperaments that provide the biological seed that may grow into narcissism.

00:29:47 — But you got to give it perfect growing conditions. All temperaments are shaped by the environment, right? So that temperamental style, if that up against a very invalidating environment, characterized, like I said, by adversity, trauma, chaos, detached caregivers, disinterested caregivers, frustrated caregivers, other lapses in attachment, that's one path of vulnerability to narcissism.

00:30:12 — Now keep in mind, the vast majority of kids who grow up under those conditions, don't become narcissistic. But when you throw in that vulnerability temper that that temperament, it may up the odds.

Now the other pathway by which people become narcissistic is the overvalued the overindulged pathway. These are kids that are told they're more special than any other kid. You don't have to wait in that line. We got it covered. We're going to get to that school. We got it. We'll take care of all of it.

00:30:38 — The child learns or is told they're more special than any other child. Now, the vast majority of kids raised this way end up with things like imposter syndrome, anxiety, or failure to launch.

They were told they're so special, but when they go into the world, they realize they're like everyone else. Everyone is special, if you want to argue that point.

However, if a child has a difficult temperament and is shaped this way, it could also give rise to a narcissist. I'd argue that both of these outcomes are wounds.

In one case, the child is being viewed as a prop, as an accessory to the parent.

00:31:12 — So you're one more tool of entitlement for them. In the other, you're harmed by the adversity of your childhood. But I'd argue all of us carry core wounds.

Rare is the person that hasn't had those core wounded experiences, at least in my world. It is, I'm sure they're out there. But the narcissism definitely is driven by core wounds. And so again, this can be viewed compassionately.

00:31:32 — And I think what the challenge is, is that for people in these relationships, I want to tell them: you can't save this person. They're an adult. Narcissistic people make more money. They're more likely to be in leadership. They're more successful at dating.

Research shows that they're judged to be more attractive. They're doing fine in the world. So, if they can take responsibility for making all that money and getting all that validation, they can take responsibility for knowing how they go through the world.

Narcissistic people also know how to turn that switch on and off.

00:32:01 — They know to be charming with the CEO on the golf course, but then they go home and scream at their wife. They know. If they were, they would have screamed at the CEO, but they don't. So they have... They know how to behave. They just take that person, spouse, whomever for granted. So this isn't a not knowing, this is calculated.

But ultimately people say, well, they do have the wound. And I say, uh-huh. So I said, and I'm very paradoxical with clients.

00:32:24 — I'll say, so you're then signing up to be the emotional punching bag for this person for the rest of their lives. Is that you're sacrificing yourself to try to save them. Just say those words out loud so I know you're clear on what you're consenting to. And people are like, well, that's not real. I said, but that's what you're doing.

Dhru Purohit

00:32:45 — You know, you shared something very powerful, which is a key distinction in your work and your approach to this topic of narcissism, which is that I heard somebody ask you, can a person stop being a narcissist?

And you shared something very powerful. You said, is very rare and you tell me if I got this right, is you've never seen a situation in your experience that somebody has all of a sudden stopped being the way they are.

00:33:14 — Now, that doesn't mean that people might not have a moment in therapy, have a couple of good days, be a little bit more mindful about how they're apologizing about something. But this goes back to something you just shared, which is that you can't save this person. Why is that so important for people to understand?

Ramani Durvasula

00:33:32 — Because you can't take responsibility for that. I mean, again, I am paid to work with people in a mental health capacity, and I don't think it's my responsibility to save them, either.

I think it's the therapist's responsibility to give people tools to live better, to address their acute distress, so that they can manage their emotions even when they're not in that office with you, right?

But it is no adult's responsibility to save another adult, least of all an adult that is harming them, right?

And to take that responsibility on, that's an impossible task. Because narcissism, like all antagonistic personality styles, is very rigid. It is not amenable to change. The healthier a person's personality, the more flexible it is. The more flexible it is, the more there can be some modification. So, a person who might be very agreeable and flexible, might still need to work on some of their conscientiousness a bit, to keep things a little tidier.

00:34:27 — They'll be like, 'Okay, yeah, I need to do this.' And they'll say, 'Every so often I slip because I start getting distracted,' but they will give it a try non-defensively.

They're like, 'Okay, I'm gonna have little labeled cabinets, and I'm gonna put my things away, and I'm gonna wake up a little earlier, and I'm gonna do my work.'

And they'll do it, and they'll say, 'Ooh, I messed up.' And then they'll try again.

That's what a person with a flexible personality does—still, the personality brings us back to our baseline.

00:34:52 — That not very conscientious person is probably going to have a little bit of trouble with discipline all their lives, but will rise to the challenge if they have a healthier personality.

The narcissistic personality is like cement. It is so rigid. So they don't think they need to change. If a person doesn't think they need to change and they think everyone else is to blame, where's the buy-in here? What do they need to change?

00:35:16 — In fact, they'll roll their eyes, saying, 'Oh my gosh, really? I have to listen to their feelings? Their feelings are dumb. What am I supposed to do with that person? Nothing!'

And so, I think that people, though, again, we're back to the casino, where we keep selling people this bad story of 'You can love people better, you can just, you can figure that pathway out.'

No, you can't. It's their responsibility to do this. But I have watched people sacrifice entire lifetimes trying to.

Dhru Purohit

00:35:45 — Mm, one of the things on that topic of sacrificing that you often hear, I've even seen it on your YouTube comments, people saying, Well, that person did tell me that they were going to change. That person said that they wanted to change, and I brought it up a couple weeks later on about that conversation, and they denied that we even had that conversation.

Ramani Durvasula

00:36:02 — Yeah, so it's gaslighting meets future faking. Welcome to narcissism.

Dhru Purohit

00:36:09 — You know, you shared something earlier when we were talking about this idea of how to spot a narcissist, and you said that even for somebody like you, this is your life's work and mission is that it can take time because there are ways that people are externally and then you don't really know how they truly are until you see them with their close relationships.

00:36:32 — So for somebody who is listening today, are there any cues or signals that they could potentially be pulling on? I'll give an example.

For example, I've heard you say that often one of the things that narcissists do is that they play in this place of praise and blame. And there's this old idea or quote, I don't know where it's attributed to, but it's that 'praise and blame are both the same.'

They're both the same energy. When you're praising somebody and building them up, it's actually more about you, in the way that you talk about it.

00:37:07 — It's not like true gratitude and making about the other person. And then there's the other side, which is blame. You want to rip them down. You want to build the person up, you want to rip them down.

Is that one example of somebody's regularly doing this in your life? Is that one sign that this person is deeply in this pattern that we're talking about?

Ramani Durvasula

00:37:27 — So you're talking about the other person in the relationship, or you're talking about the narcissistic person?

I don't think they're going to praise. I don't think they're going to praise that much. I really, really don't. I think that they're going to blame and blame and blame and blame. The praisey part is only going to happen at the beginning of the relationship.

Or if they need something from you, right? So they're very calculated. And narcissistic people are actually incredibly socially perceptive. They know how other people tick, so they'll know what matters.

00:37:53 — And so the praise you're talking about might be, I'm going to—it's very transactional, right? I'm going to give them what they want, right? So that kind of tricks the other person who's hearing what they want, getting what they want. Ooh, we're going away for a couple of days, or they remembered my birthday, or whatever it may be, then that person's getting something.

It's not even praise like 'You're so pretty,' but that could be—you'd be amazed at how often, I mean, you'd be amazed at how long one utterance, like 'You look beautiful tonight,' buys a person another six months in a relationship with a narcissist. It's pretty bad.

And so you'll hear whatever that praise is, you'll relax, you'll think, 'Oh, I misjudged this relationship,' and then boom, they will tear you back down. Narcissistic people put people on pedestals simply to knock them down. And the fall is a lot harder from up there.

So they put you on a pedestal; you might be wanting to look for your parachute real soon, so you can at least soften that landing.

Dhru Purohit

00:38:45 — That's a great distinction that it's the praise that I was talking about. It's really a transaction.

Ramani Durvasula

00:38:50 — It's a transaction.

Dhru Purohit

00:38:51 — It's not a genuine gratitude or acknowledgement, which is something different.

Ramani Durvasula

00:38:54 — That's real.

Dhru Purohit

00:38:55 — That's what people do when they care about each other, when they want to acknowledge something. This is really a transactional building you up to take you down.

Ramani Durvasula

Correct. Correct.

Signs of Vulnerable Narcissism

Dhru Purohit

You know, earlier in the conversation, you mentioned that there are these archetypes and types of narcissism, and I think it's worthwhile to go through some of them and you've outlined them in your book and written about it previously. Can you walk us through those?

Ramani Durvasula

00:39:16 — Yeah. So the most classical form of narcissism that we most often think about is grandiose narcissism. The grandiose narcissistic person is almost like our armchair textbook definition: arrogant, pretentious, preening, "look at me," status-oriented, really cares about appearances. Interestingly, of all the types of narcissism, grandiose narcissistic folks tend to have the best outcomes, believe it or not, because they're not as victimized.

00:39:44 — Like, as long as things are going generally the way the grandiose narcissist wants, I'm not saying it's a healthy relationship. I mean, we're talking about really like matters of, you know, "what's the best, worst disease to get" kind of thing here, right? So it's really a matter of the grandiose narcissistic person really caring about appearances. They're very, very forward-facing, right? So that's the grandiose narcissist. And that typically, even in the DSM and other diagnostic spaces, that formulation of narcissism is what we've classically focused on.

00:40:13 — However, especially in the last 10 years, there's been more focus on what's called vulnerable narcissism, which to me is probably the most important evolution in this conversation. And the vulnerable narcissistic person is the one we often miss, because they're not quite as charming, charismatic, shiny, compelling. These are folks who are sullen, petulant, resentful, victimized, passive-aggressive.

00:40:35 — They are angry at everyone in the world. They feel like everyone has gotten more than them. 'Why me? Woe is me. Which one? Everyone's out to get me.' And also, vulnerable narcissistic people may be more sad; they may be very socially anxious. So to somebody looking from the outside in, they'll actually say, 'This person's not narcissistic, they're kind of not well put together actually,' and they often sort of pull for being rescued, right?

00:40:59 — So a lot of people will get caught up in trying to help them. Let me give them an opportunity. Let them give me a let me give them a couch to sleep on. Let me give them. Let me borrow them. Let me loan them some money. Let me help them and then it becomes like this.

Literally a vortex a black hole to which you could just keep putting more and more and it's never enough and they sort of remain frozen in time and space, no matter how much resource, time, support, encouragement you give them.

00:41:25 — That's the vulnerable narcissist. Now, grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are sort of like these kind of these, these complimentary structures. If things start going wrong and wrong and wrong and wrong and wrong for the grandiose narcissist, they start looking like a vulnerable narcissist, sullen, petulant, aggrieved, everyone's out to get me. If things start going really right for the vulnerable narcissist, their grandiosity will pop out.

00:41:51 — So people are either more primarily grandiose or more vulnerable, but circumstances can kind of flip it and sort of make that other form of narcissism show up. The next form of narcissism...

Dhru Purohit

Could I insert one thing there just to clarify?

00:42:03 — One of the things that I heard you share previously is that vulnerable narcissist, even though we talked about women being the brunt of most of the narcissistic behavior, the receiving end of it, you typically would find when you do find a woman who's a narcissist, it's often more likely to be a vulnerable narcissist. Is that accurate?

Ramani Durvasula

00:42:21 — Is that accurate? Yes, absolutely. So vulnerable narcissism is pretty much equally distributed between genders. Grandiose narcissism is much more prevalent in men. Malignant narcissism is where we're talking about that more severe

narcissism. We may still see some of the charm and the charisma, but we can also see a callousness at this point, right? There is a lot of vindictiveness in the malignant narcissist. There is the willingness to take advantage of people's vulnerabilities, isolate another person.

00:42:51 — So the charm is really kind of short-lived and not nearly as shiny as it is with the grandiose narcissistic person.

Malignant narcissistic people will be very controlling. And the way that might even show up in an intimate relationship is they may be intently focused on someone else.

Like, 'I want to spend all my time with you. Why do you want to spend time with your friends? Aren't you into me?'

They might do things like buy them a phone as a gift, which is a way they can track them.

00:43:16 — I always tell young people, don't ever accept a device or a phone as a gift from someone you're in an intimate relationship with. It's very dangerous. You maintain your own phone accounts and your own devices always until you are so certain that this is a safe relationship. But that seems like a generous gift you could get from someone, right? So it's those kinds of things that a malignant narcissistic person would do.

00:43:37 — Those relationships can get dangerous. And of all the forms of narcissistic relationships, physical violence and aggression is going to be most likely to show up in a malignant narcissistic relationship and then secondarily in a vulnerable narcissistic relationship.

Then we get to some interesting forms of narcissism. Most pointedly, the communal narcissist. The communal narcissistic person is the—I call them sort of the 'shirt off your back' narcissist. These are the people who seem generous. They seem like they're humanitarian.

00:44:06 — They seem like they're trying to save the world. They're out there putting out their message, and that's how they get their validation. So someone will say, 'Well, there's probably no such thing as human altruism. Isn't anyone trying to do good in the world trying to do it for some validation?'

Not—oh, that's usually not the primary motivation. And the reason we know this is if a communal narcissist isn't getting lots of cheers and congratulations and 'You're so great, and you're the best,' they will get quite angry. And they will usually take that anger out at family members again.

00:44:37 — That's very those people in their inner circle. So lots of people will say we'll look at us even a celebrity seeming like, you know humanitarian and then someday. We'll see the leaks or people saying oh my gosh. This was the most nightmarish thing I've ever worked on or their families will say it was so hard because we couldn't even get support. Everyone said our dad was the hometown hero and

built a little league field and yet we were all suffering with this really cruel person at home.

00:45:02 — That's the communal narcissist. At the highest, most severe end of a communal narcissist, we're seeing someone who looks more like a cult leader. At the more mild end of the communal narcissist, we're looking at that kind of really cruel PTA mom who's going to run everyone into the ground doing that, right? Then we have the self-right.

Dhru Purohit

Because in their eyes, the ends justify the means?

Ramani Durvasula

But no, because in their eyes, they need to be validated. And this is a great way.

00:45:30 — This social media really blew the communal narcissist kind of up because look at, I'm rescuing, I'm rescuing the animals on the beach. You know, Tuesday is elephant rescue day.

And it's like, everything is something with them. And like, look at me, I'm so great, I'm rescuing the world. And they'll often get to be quite judgmental of others. Like, well, have you done your volunteering this week? And you're thinking, 'Lady, I'm not even able to get into bed before 10 o'clock.' And like, 'Well, I make time for other people.'

00:45:57 — So it's all about them being validated. And look, having run into some of those PTA mothers, very controlling, very invalidating, almost very cruel. And yet everything's like, 'I'm doing it for the kids.'

I'm like, 'Doing what for the kids? Invalidating and destroying the souls of the other mothers? Seems like not a great way to do it.'

The Self-Righteous Narcissist

Ramani Durvasula

Then we have the self-righteous narcissist. The self-righteous narcissist is actually—back in the day, that was a personality style called the anacastic style.

00:46:24 — It's like an obsessive-compulsive style, not like OCD obsessive-compulsive, but like obsessive in terms of detail and morality. These are often people who are very workaholic. They are judgmental. They are very, very stingy with money. They're punitive. They're cold. They often live very, very, very regionally obsessively ordered lives, like everything just so.

00:46:50 — And if anyone messes with their schedule—so I mean, listen, if somebody wants to get up at four in the morning and drink goat milk with kale, you do you. You let me keep sleeping and don't judge me for not.

But these are the folks who will shame other people, saying, 'Well, I live better than you; I am better than you.' And they're the folks who'll say if dinner's at six, and someone who's got sick kids and is quickly trying to get there gets there at 6:15, they'll say, 'Well, dinner is at six, and we have eaten.'

00:47:16 — And so it comes off as very moralistic and cold. And if you grew up with a self-righteous, narcissistic parent, it is a horribly cold, cruel, invalidating experience because the child feels like they're constantly being judged. These are kids who will say, we were very anxious as kids because we had to do, as kids, we had to do everything they said. The rooms, it was like military, you know, bedrooms and the schedules were like that. And the dining table, the dinner table was such a fraught space.

00:47:44 — So, it's a very, very cold, invalidating—like I said, moralistic, judgmental, work above all—shaming anyone who's had bad luck. The kind of thing like, 'Well, if you'd saved your pennies, you wouldn't be in this situation.'

Not accounting for they'd lost their job and then they got very ill. Then there's none of that. Like, 'If you'd lived your life like me, everything would be fine.'

00:48:06 — So, there's a real lack of empathy and an entitlement in that style that comes out in a really self-righteous way.

Dhru Purohit

00:48:12 — You know, it's so helpful to hear you break them down because I can imagine that everybody listening is going to be thinking that there's probably at least one person that they know and could even be somebody who raised them.

Ramani Durvasula

Correct.

Dhru Purohit

Very commonly.

Ramani Durvasula

00:48:25 — Very commonly.

Dhru Purohit

00:48:26 — Yeah. And with all of these across the board, I think the thing that is important to remind people is that often, because it takes many years in the case of children, you don't know that your parent is narcissistic when you're younger. Or if you were unfortunately raised by somebody like that. So many people who are listening today, who are saying, okay, yeah, this feels like somebody that's in my life. They also, regardless of what type it is, they have felt at some point in time that they were the cause or they were to blame.

00:48:56 — Where does that come from?

Ramani Durvasula

00:48:58 — Right, so we as human beings are oriented towards attachment and connections. We need human relationships. And obviously that's most pointed when we're children. To survive, we need attachment. There's no plan B, there's no other parents we can find. So we gotta make the people we've got in front of me. That's why children can endure horrific abuse and still try to remain connected to a parent because that's all we've got. But as adults, that doesn't go away. Our need for attachment persists.

00:49:25 — It's a very central core part of being a healthy human being. That means that when we're in a close relationship and these kinds of invalidating, negating, manipulative patterns show up, our first go-to isn't, I'm out of here. For many people, it's, how can I make this work? How am I contributing to this? And the more we can internalize it within ourselves, internalize the blame in ourselves, the more we can do something about it.

00:49:50 — So the child not only is told by the narcissistic parent that their needs are shamed, their emotions are shamed, their wants are shamed. The child is basically put in a position where they exist to serve the parent rather than the parent protecting them. There's no psychological safety. In these spaces, so the child has to become smaller and smaller and smaller and exactly what the parent wants them to be to be able to survive in those systems. When that child goes into adulthood, guess what they're gonna keep doing in relationships?

00:50:17 — Be small and not show up in their whole self because they're convinced if I do that, I'm not gonna be able to be close to someone, right? And that's a very felt sort of an experience.

So the child blames themselves. 'I'm a bad kid. I'm not enough. I'm not smart enough. I'm not good. I'm not a good kid.' Basically, they internalize that; that becomes their identity—the identity of damage, the identity of shame, the identity of not being good enough—because that's in essence what the parent is implicitly communicating.

That, again, dogs a person into adulthood. But if we can take this on ourselves, we can remain attached, right? But if we see it in the other person, well, then that's a call to action to say, 'This isn't good for me.'

And then what? Then, sort of axiomatically, it means we gotta go. And so anything to take away that we gotta go, so we hold on to things like hope. 'What can I do, or how can I fix this?' or almost not seeing it.

00:51:11 — Like there's a there's a dissociative quality when we're in these relationships. There's a phenomenon that Dr. Jennifer Freyd calls 'Betrayal blindness'.

We conveniently kind of don't see these things that will get in the way of us maintaining an attachment. Cognitive dissonance. We don't like it when the pieces don't fit. This is my spouse. They're really mean to me. How do I make the pieces fit? Maybe they just had a bad day hey, maybe I'm not keeping the house clean enough. Those things are all put together. By the time it's done, a person truly believes they're the bad one.

00:51:40 — And then you throw some gaslighting on top of that. And the gaslighting where the narcissistic person is literally telling you not only you're wrong, but there's something wrong with you. You hear that enough, you believe it. And so then the person in the relationship feels as though there is something wrong with them. And without somebody explaining what's going on, then they're going to hold that on as an identity. And that's magnified if they grew up with a narcissistic or invalidating parent.

Dhru Purohit

00:52:05 — Wow. So for that person who's listening, who might feel that they're in that space, the person who's internalized that blame felt that they were maybe a big contributor or the biggest contributor to the reason that this narcissistic individual was acting the way they are. Is step one for them truly just first having awareness that this is even going on in the first place.

Ramani Durvasula

00:52:28 — So I think that we're in an era where we feel things in our body before we feel things in our mind. So people will say, 'I am so wiped out after spending time with them.'

Like, 'I'm just not feeling well,' or once we give a name to it, like, yeah, 'You don't feel psychologically safe.' It's starting to give name to what people are feeling.

But people will say, 'Why am I dreading going? Why am I procrastinating going to their house?' In a million different ways, we're telling ourselves like we don't like this relationship, right?

We dread the weekends, but instead of welcoming the weekends—because on the weekends it might mean you have to spend time with them, right? So all of those things are happening, but people don't quite understand it.

Listen, I'm sure that the reason my YouTube channel has so many hits is that at three in the morning, people are typing in, 'My spouse has no empathy and is super selfish

and yells at me a lot,' bing, Dr. Romani's YouTube channel. I'm convinced of that because I don't think people have a name for it.

They're just sort of, 'What is this? What is going on? What's going on?' And people also feel embarrassed and ashamed about taking that to their friends because they may not plan on leaving the relationship, and they don't want to sort of create bad buzz about their partner or their family member to people who are close to them.

Some people may get into therapy, but a lot of therapists don't know what this is.

00:53:46 — So they might keep focusing on, And I think this is one of the big mistakes of therapy. The therapist often folks, what's happening for you? How do you feel? What's your experience? Girl, I don't care about your experience. I need to talk to you about that mess you live with. That's how I do therapy.

Dhru Purohit

00:54:01 — Wow, I can say as somebody in my audience knows me, I can raise my hand and say, I've been there at one point in time in my life, probably a couple of points in time in my life. And my story around that was not wanting to throw the word narcissist around because I thought it's not spiritual or whatever else. You know, you've heard all this before. I've felt, you know what, this is a difficult personality.

00:54:27 — They have wounds that are driving them. I can see some of those wounds. I have to be stronger to manage that...

Ramani Durvasula

No

Dhru Purohit

Which I know now isn't true, but I'm sure you've heard that from people.

Ramani Durvasula

00:54:36 — Oh, and I'm sure many people listening to this still feel that way. Because I think this is where the toxic positivity movement has done a lot of disservice to people in narcissistic relationships who said just that: 'Well, they're wounded, so I need to be better.'

I'm like, no, they're wounded. They need to take responsibility for their wounds.

Like, no human being should ever be enlisted into the role of being another person's punching bag or pacifier. That is not how life works.

00:55:03 — And so there's—and the fact of the matter is that the narcissistic person will gobble the other person up alive. They don't care.

I think it's getting your head around that this person actually doesn't care. They may even be like, people say, 'But they're so smart. They're so smart. How could they not care?'

I'm like, why do you think smart and care have anything to do with each other? They are so smart, and they don't care. That can be one sentence.

And I think people struggle with that. They'll say, 'They're really good at this, or they're such a good cook.' I'm like, good, they're a good cook. And they don't care.

Like, you can have this as one sentence. So people are coming up with these strange constructions.

But I hear you when you say that they do have wounds. And people—there are many, many, many, the vast majority of wounded people out there do the work. They go and they face those demons, painful as it is. And that is something that that narcissistic person could do.

00:55:55 — But again, it's a choice not to. And that's the hardest part of all of this.

But I also know that not everyone can walk away. This isn't about walking away; that's not the only path forward. It's knowing what it is and knowing how to engage in it.

So if somebody never listens to you, talks over you, has no empathy for you, has no interest in you, laughs and mocks you, laughs at you and mocks you when you share an emotion, tells you you're ridiculous and gaslights you, then that really should be a wake-up call that you shouldn't be sharing anything with them.

You want to talk to them about the weather? Do it. You want to talk to them about the Dodger game? Fine. But don't talk to them about anything else.

I mean, it's the equivalent of having a really precious antique in your home and giving it to someone who's drunk and careless and is going to drop it on the ground.

The Emotional Impact of Silence in Narcissistic Relationships

Dhru Purohit

00:56:47 — In fact, that's one of the tips inside of your book is this idea of like, we all have some of those people in our lives, and maybe it's a boss, a co-worker, a parent, a parent who's getting older, and different forms of narcissism might come out. It could be anything. It could be a partner. Partner. And in those situations, one of your big things is don't engage or engage as minimal as possible. You just kind of broke it down, but I think you have a framework for that.

Ramani Durvasula

00:57:14 — I say don't go deep. Don't defend, don't engage, don't explain, and don't personalize.

Dhru Purohit

00:57:22 — What types of relationships in our life, as an example, because I'm sure there's some relation like that may not work with a spouse.

Ramani Durvasula

Sure.

Dhru Purohit

Potentially it will.

Ramani Durvasula

00:57:31 — Absolutely. Because you're not engaging, right?

So when they say, 'Um, why don't you ever take out the trash?' and you're the one taking out the trash every single day, three times a day, don't defend yourself and say that. They're not looking for a fight. They're not looking for a quantitative breakdown of the number of times you take out the trash. They're not interested in the truth; they're interested in bashing you. So when they say, 'Why don't you take out the trash more often?' you're like, 'Okay.'

00:58:03 — And that's your answer. Instead of saying, 'But I take out the trash. I took the trash out three times yesterday. In fact, I know I took it out three times yesterday because it was raining.'

No, you don't explain. So many people want to say, 'But I want them to hear my point of view.' They're not listening. They're not listening. And sometimes people say, 'But I want to defend myself.' I said, 'If you want to, then do it.' But be prepared to be gaslighted, be prepared to be talked over, be prepared to be humiliated.

00:58:32 — So I'll say, do whatever you want, but then you need to be prepared for what's going to come back at you. And if you don't want those things to happen to you, then don't do it.

So, and I think people get sad. They're saying, 'Are you telling me that all there's really left to talk about with my spouse, if I don't want to fight with them, is the weather and the change of season and that the freeway might be closed this weekend?'

I'm like, yep. And they'll say, 'I feel really sad.'

00:58:57 — And I said, let's compare it to what this relationship's been and like, yeah, that's been really sad too. You know, so I think that this don't go deep really shows the relationship for what it is. And there's a lot of grief. This whole process is riddled with grief. People wanted these to be not just marriages that lasted, but marriages that were healthy and had depth that they will never have. And so, radical acceptance is,

you can stay, but this is never going to be a deep, intimate, connected person who stands by your side on tough times relationship.

00:59:29 — It's just not. So, you better start building up the supports who will be your people when you do have your tough days, when you need that ride to a chemo appointment, when you need someone to talk to you when you get scary medical news, when you're going through a dark night of the soul after you retire. Whatever it may be, it ain't going to be the narcissist.

Dhru Purohit

00:59:48 — So that would be advice if I understand that would be advice for somebody who's in a situation where they say, I can't leave. I can't leave right now.

Ramani Durvasula

00:59:56 — Yeah.

Radical Acceptance and Healing in Narcissistic Relationships

Dhru Purohit

00:59:56 — Right. Um, and again, just to clarify, I know everybody understands this as who's made it this far in the conversation, which I'm sure is a lot of people because you're a big hit. Um, and your work is a big hit and it's making a difference. All of us have bad moments, bad days, and we have to make sure that everybody understands this. That is not what we're talking about.

Ramani Durvasula

01:00:18 — We're not. And I really want people to know that this isn't a bad moment. We all have bad moments. We're abrupt with a friend. We're snippy with a family member. We forget something that matters to someone.

And then we're like, probably within an hour or two, at least that same day, most of us will say, 'What have I done? That was so not okay.'

You know what a healthy person does? We pick up the phone and say, 'I am so sorry. That was not okay. I'm not even gonna give you an explanation because it just wasn't okay. I hurt you, and I'm so sorry. I'm here, and you let me know how I can make this right if there is a way to make it right.'

And then you double down on being better in that relationship. That's what most of us do when we screw up. We don't go all the time or— it'll be that one, like I said, the one day everything's falling down around us and we're not our best selves, but we make amends.

01:01:11 — We take responsibility. Narcissistic people never take responsibility. They'll say, 'It's your fault for not knowing I had a bad day,' thinking like I'm supposed to read your mind.

Okay, a healthy person won't do that. So if we have a—maybe we berate a receptionist at a medical office because we've been waiting for three hours and weren't being given information.

Sure, that's a really unpleasant circumstance, and we may be snappy that day, but we may also apologize, and we may never do it again.

01:01:40 — The key with something like narcissism, it's consistently like this. So if somebody is in a relationship with someone and they have an argument and it's inflammatory one night, one night, and then there was an attempt to make amends and there's been growth and there's been awareness, that's not narcissism. And I think it's that reparative, restorative work. We don't see that in narcissistic relationships.

Dhru Purohit

01:02:02 — Yeah, this is something very different.

Ramani Durvasula

01:02:04 — That we're talking about here.

Dhru Purohit

01:02:06 — So to take it a little bit further, that was the advice you had for somebody who might be in a situation. And I've had family members in this place who said, 'I can't leave; I want the kids to get to college.'

Ramani Durvasula

01:02:19 — Yeah.

The Importance of Radical Acceptance

Dhru Purohit

01:02:20 — That's a common thing, very common. Often from a situation of a woman who's in a relationship with somebody who might be—who is extremely narcissistic, in extreme situations abusive, physically abusive, Machiavellian, as you call it sometimes.

And they feel like, 'I have to manage because if I left, then I'm gonna be in a situation where I can't protect.' They might feel this way.

01:02:46 — I'm not saying it's true or not true. I can't protect maybe children or whatever might be there.

For the vast majority of people and the clients that you work with, and going back to the beginning part of the conversation, if somebody can leave, part of what I'm understanding that you're helping them look at is that if you decide to stay, or if you're in this in-between stage of deciding to stay or deciding to go, it's so important you understand, you realize all the goals, dreams, and your health that you are going to be sacrificing if you choose to stay.

Because, as you mentioned, you're not trying to push somebody to stay or leave. It's more about having the awareness of what you are giving up and sacrificing because you will be sacrificing a lot if you choose to stay.

Ramani Durvasula

01:03:36 — Yeah, but I also would caution people: you will be sacrificing, but... but... But all is not lost. You can still heal.

And one of the key pieces is that if you are going to stay in the relationship, you really, really need to develop your bench, as it were. You need to have your supports. And a lot of people say, 'But it's my husband who's supposed to take me to chemo.' I'm like, you don't live in that world.

And we're going to—but your friend has been offering, 'I will take you, and we'll go and we'll watch silly shows on my computer.'

01:04:06 — Please go with that friend. Like there's a sense of, but that's what someone else was supposed to do for me. That radical acceptance is they're not taking you to chemo. And if they do, they're going to complain the whole time, which is the worst thing that could happen for you when you're sitting in a chemo appointment. So, it is helping people see that you have to cultivate supports, you have to cultivate meaning and purpose, you have to cultivate an authentic sense of you separate from the narcissistic person.

01:04:33 — They're like a tree that's growing through the middle of your living room. You're just going to have to arrange the furniture around it. That's the staying part. If you leave, it ain't no picnic either. If you leave a narcissistic relationship and they don't want you to leave, be prepared for post separation abuse. That's most common in intimate relationships. Listen, narcissistic people like to be in charge of the narrative, right? They don't like it when someone says, I'm taking control in my own hands, I'm out of here.

01:04:57 — That's why narcissistic divorces are so financially punitive, even if the kids are into adulthood. So it is—I tell folks, if you're gonna leave and you're the one who wants to leave, and the narcissistic person doesn't want you to leave, especially for financial purposes, you better have a heavy hand on your hat because it's gonna blow away.

And this is why—I mean, this is what I mean. I say this as a feminist, but I also say this for women to always ensure they have some form of autonomous income stream. Because otherwise, they're—people say, 'Oh, come on, I'm signing this prenup,' but if it didn't work out, they're not going to be so — they're going to be that bad.

And worse, they will have no problem finding out that you are living, don't have anywhere to live, that you're sofa surfing. I've seen people—like their narcissistic partner, when the partner left, said, 'I will see to it that you never have a roof over your head.' And they succeeded at that.

People who were stripped down to nothing, going into their 60s and 70s with no health insurance, no stable place to live.

01:05:55 — They've been out of the workforce for a very long time. So it's difficult to get hired. They're qualifying for public benefits. It's a nightmare scenario. And if people think that it can't happen to them, they're not keeping it real. Our divorce laws aren't designed to protect people from narcissistic relationships. They're just not. It's not going to ever be accounted for in a legal system. And so that piece of it is sometimes people will say, you know what?

01:06:20 — Had I known it was this bad, I would have stayed and figured out the workarounds. Because I'm in a different kind of a nightmare now. So it ain't no picnic to leave.

And if you decide to leave a family system, some people will say, 'I just wanted to stop speaking to my mother.' But in doing that, it set off sort of a domino effect where other members of the family said, 'What's wrong with you? You're making our family look bad. What kind of person does this? Who does this? You only have one mother.'

And so now the person's finding that they're losing an entire family system that they actually do care about. Men like people in that system. So they recognize that the price of poker is that they've got to maintain that relationship with the mother. And that's also a really sobering awareness as well.

Dhru Purohit

01:07:01 — For those that feel like they can leave or at least put a heavy amount of distance between them and that narcissistic person in their life, What are some important things for that individual to know in terms of the best way to go about it? Let's take, you know, we've talked about the situation of spouses.

01:07:21 — Let's take a very common situation, a coworker, a boss, a friend that you used to get along with, but then maybe you had this realization on later on in life that it's actually maybe a toxic friendship. Are there any important things that they should be keeping in mind?

Ramani Durvasula

01:07:36 — Yeah. So, I mean, a lot of people will often romanticize their narcissistic collegial relationships, workplaces, friendships. And when I say to them, 'Tell me what you like about this friend. Really tell me, what do you like about them?' they'll be like, 'I don't know. Like, it's—I don't know. Like, we've known each other a while.'

Okay, so that's not something you like about them. That's time served. Tell me something you like about them. And they'll have trouble.

01:08:02 — And we'll realize how much even friendships are kept together by nothing more than nostalgia or the creation we've made. So really, when we stop and think of the people in our lives, do we stop and really think about what is it about this relationship, friendship, collegial relationships, intimate relationship? And the more narcissistic it is, the less likely you're able to find some tangible reason you stay in this friendship, right? That's one thing.

01:08:29 — But if you were to step out of one of these narcissistic workplaces, workplaces are sometimes a little bit easier here, because it's unusual, unless it's like a small business, like it's a business partnership or something like that, and then someone's coming for someone else, that can get a lot more thorny. But if it's sort of a workplace of medium, even small to medium business, people can often step away, and then they'll forget about you, and you'll sort of walk away. Sometimes people are hurt with the smear campaigns or the reputational damage that can happen though, that can happen.

01:08:59 — When we leave a friendship, you know, I think that for folks it is that painful realization that you were actually doing most of the heavy lifting in the friendship, that you were the one listening to them all the time and they were never listening to you. And the first time you made the friendship be sort of accountable, that person crumbled on you. Or the first time the balance changed in the relationship and you needed again to be seen or heard, the whole thing disappeared. And then you start to recognize that this thing was being held together with sort of duct tape and staples.

01:09:28 — It was never really a healthy friendship, and there's grief around it. I always tell folks you've got to build in that grief.

People say, 'Why should I feel grief about losing a toxic relationship?' I said, because for a time—whether it's a placeholder or whatever it was—if you're in your body and in your mind, this relationship meant something to you. It's gone, and now it's gone.

You've experienced a loss, and while most people will say in the long term they were thrilled that this relationship's gone, in the short term, either it's the stress of the post-separation abuse, or it's the sense of, 'I can't get it right,' or 'How come I couldn't even keep that friendship going?' or 'What's wrong with me?'

Or they seem to have other friends—'Is there something wrong with me?'—because they're able to get along with other people. So it can really do a sort of number on a person.

But by and large, most people six, 12 months out after they're out of a narcissistic relationship will say, 'Getting out of that relationship is the best thing that ever happened to me.'

Dhru Purohit

01:10:20 — You often hear people say, and I've felt this before with friendships, that just you grow out of that are like, it's just incredibly toxic. It's luckily knock on wood is that it's only happened with a couple people. Is there's this deep sense of feeling lightness that there's this absence of drama in your life. And you're like, you maybe even have this moment of just sitting or doing something or walking. You're like, she's very peaceful right now.

01:10:47 — Not having this individual as a persistent sort of wounded individual who's taking their pain out, or trying to take their pain out on you.

Ramani Durvasula

01:10:58 — It's funny you say that. And I bet everyone listening to this, and I would say everyone listening to this, join me in this experiment, so close your eyes and think about this, that there was a time in your life, and I'm thinking of a specific case in my life, where there was a get together, and the narcissistic person opted not to come. Okay, so think of a time when that happened, okay? And I'm telling you in my circumstance, it was astonishing to me. It was astonishing, like, I was very tense about this get-together, I'm like, oh, and I was already thinking through all the strategies.

01:11:30 — At the 11th hour, the person decided not to come. And one thing I've learned about narcissistic people: they want you to ooh and ah, 'Please come, please come.'

I ain't playing that game. You said you don't want to come? And I'll say, 'Okay, well, we're leaving in 15 minutes, and we'll be back in X number of hours.' And they said, 'Okay.'

I do not have words for you for how lovely this event was without them. It was like watching silk flow through the room. Everyone got along and things moved at such a lovely pace. Nobody was tense. The difference was beyond palpable. Like it was like there was a neon sign saying, look how much better this is.

I'm sure everyone listening to this can think of a time when they're like, 'Yeah, the narcissistic friend didn't show up,' or 'The narcissistic colleague didn't come to the company retreat,' or 'The narcissistic family member didn't come to the reunion or the wedding,' and it was a categorically different experience.

They left early, and everything lightened up. And so when we see that difference, these are people who suck the oxygen out of the room, bring such negativity. And that one time, it was a revelation. I always knew it—like I knew if this person wasn't here, it'd be better, but I'd never had the chance to try it out.

Then when they didn't come, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, like this is totally, totally, totally different.' I'm like, 'Oh, is this how this thing called air conditioning works?' Like, it was completely different.

Dhru Purohit

01:12:54 — Wow, that's powerful. You know, we've done a few episodes on this topic of having the precautionary approach in your life when it comes to your wellness. There's a lot of products that are made today that we just have to be a little bit mindful of putting toxic substances into our body. We may not know exactly how harmful they are, but we want to take a precautionary approach.

01:13:16 — In that same way, you have a framework when it comes to individuals who are meeting people, living a big life, you're an author, you go on podcasts, you hang out, you get invited to a lot of different things and even just the average person who's maybe not in that situation, you're meeting new people, you're meeting somebody at your kid's school, you're making new friends. You have this framework for helping people live a more precautionary or as you say, a discerning. Having a discerning approach to who you let into your world.

01:13:47 — Can you talk about that and how your framework can help protect individuals from letting narcissistic people in, in the first place?

Ramani Durvasula

01:13:56 — Number one, slow down, slow way down. Because again, body and mind are so interesting. They need a minute, right? They really need a minute for you to be with someone, pay attention to that sense of psychological safety. In some ways, it's also equally important for us to know how we feel in our bodies when we don't feel safe, right? So if we're feeling that or we're not feeling that, like when we're with somebody who is safe and comfortable and you're having a conversation characterized by reciprocity, your body relaxes.

01:14:24 — You find yourself like, oh, I'm not trying, I'm not being performative, I'm being myself, versus, it's interesting, just I recently had an encounter with someone where I did not feel comfortable, I did not. Even the way I was sitting, I was sitting almost like hunched over, my physiologically, my body was almost putting itself in an uncomfortable position. My head hurt at the end of the other circumstances is somebody I do not want to see again.

01:14:49 — I now know that. And that's now on my list of people I don't want to see again. I very much learned to slow down. And after after the event, where I'd usually just rush into my car, I sat my event, I closed my eyes, I breathe, I paid attention on my body feels I'm like, okay, my head is killing me, my neck is killing me, my gut was killing me. All of that was not comfortable. And I'm going to use this as a contrast. Like right now, I'm enjoying this time with you. I feel very much in my body.

01:15:14 — I feel like this is a very mutual interaction. See what I'm saying? So when I leave, I'll be like, this felt like a very safe space to me. So we pay attention to that, number one. Number two, we have to have our good, safe people, right? Our sounding boards. Our people who, when we go to them and say, I think I feel crazy, you'll say, you're not, you're not crazy. Like talk to me and we'll listen to you. You don't need a lot, you don't need 50 people like that. If you even have one, two or three, you're doing great.

01:15:41 — One of them might even be a therapist, but have sounding boards. That's a huge piece to this idea of being discerning, of again, taking it slow, paying attention to your body, paying attention to what you're telling yourself. There was a time, this uncomfortable interaction I had, there was a time I would have thought, oh, Gromit, you can't get along with anyone, or you're so unsophisticated or something like that.

01:16:08 — I'm like, no, I just didn't feel right. So part of that is giving yourself, you can't gaslight yourself. And I think we gaslight ourselves all the time. We tell ourselves there's something wrong with us. We did it wrong. We're the ones who are damaged, whatever it may be, instead of trusting ourselves. And interestingly, it doesn't have to be an indictment of the other person. I'm not saying this other person is a, quote unquote, bad person. For whatever reason, my body was not feeling comfortable in this person's presence, whatever that means.

01:16:35 — And my body feels comfortable in a lot of people's presences. So there was something in that dance that wasn't working. I kind of knew what it was, but I paid attention to that. And so I'm a big fan of writing stuff down. I really think that we think we're gonna remember stuff and we don't, and there's something, and I'm talking writing it down, ideally with a pencil in your hand, not just in your phone.

01:16:58 — That sort of physiological experience of pen or pencil in hand on paper, that can often help us sort of register memories in a way that we're also starting to trust ourselves more. But all of those things together do make us more discerning. And I'm going to give you this example too, and this has a lot of bearing on your podcast. Which is, when you think about the kinds of things you talk about, the things you've talked about with other guests, of how careful people are, like you said, putting toxic substances in your mouth. Don't eat this.

01:17:27 — Don't eat something that's, you know, unprocessed. Or don't eat super processed food. Don't drink this. Don't smoke this. Don't do that. Don't, don't, don't, don't, don't. So we spend a lot of time being super discerning about what we consume, what we put in our bodies. If we brought that level of discernment to people, we'd be so much more healthy.

01:17:47 — So if you can sit in the market and say, organic or grown here and spend all that time in your fancy groceries or figuring that out, then you owe yourself to spend the equal amount of effort in being discerning about the human beings you let close to you. It's far more important.

Dhru Purohit

01:18:04 — That's powerful. I think that will change, right? That right there will impact a lot of people because you are getting involved before something can become an issue much later on. You know, so going back to that lesson, it's slowing down, using the process of discernment, paying attention to the body. What do I feel in my body? Maybe even journaling it, talking it out with somebody.

01:18:25 — You know what, it's, I'm so excited about this potential business partnership, but I don't know, I'm like always anxious around this person or I feel, uh, I feel invalidated when I leave, you know, talk out your feelings that are there. So that's all part of the process of slowing down and actually processing. I've also heard you share a quote from Maya Angelou that some people know, and that quote is: 'When people show you who they are, believe them.'

01:18:52 — Is that something that we can also do actually when you're meeting somebody for the first and they're telling you about how their entire life everybody's wronged them, and they're playing the victim at every stage. Tell us how this quote can be useful for people.

Ramani Durvasula

01:19:09 — That quote, I mean, again, it's so... My answer is genius, so of course the quote is genius. When people show you who they are, believe them. What I love about that quote is she's telling you to pay attention to what the person's showing you. This is not an assumption on your, it's not a perception in your mind. They're behaving in a certain way. I've always loved this Maya Angelou quote because it is about weighing in on a person's behavior.

01:19:35 — They've now done the thing—whether it's lied to you, betrayed you, treated you with disregard, invalidated you. When they're showing you that this is in their behavioral repertoire, sit up and pay attention because our best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.

So if someone is—people say, 'Well, they lied to me twice, so I think they've learned and they're not going to lie to me again.' I'm like, I hope you're open to betting on odds on this one because I'm taking that bet. Thank you so much. They're going to do this.

So it's that—she basically, what she's saying in this quote is that behavior is consistent. And when someone's showing you who they are, don't fall into the vat of our cognitive dissonance, trauma-bonded, driven justifications and rationalizations and explaining it away. Believe it.

01:20:32 — It doesn't mean you have to run away from somebody the first time you meet them. It might mean that you may not scramble to see them a second time, it might be you move, again, that slowness is so important. And taking your time, continually listening to your body. In the book, I actually make this, I talk about

something I had learned once in grad school, it's the rule of threes, right? The first time something happens, it happens, whatever.

01:20:59 — The second time that same thing happens, it's a coincidence. The third time it happens, it's a pattern. That rule of threes helps sometimes people, for people like I, that just happened three times, like, it's a pattern. You know, I understand how at one time, we don't wanna just sort of cut and run, that feels like a bit much, right? Even at two, but three, come on.

Dhru Purohit

01:21:21 — Part of that could also include, especially in the early stages when people are dating.

Ramani Durvasula

01:21:25 — And just getting to know somebody,

Dhru Purohit

01:21:27 — Or even making friends with somebody, somebody who's maybe persistent about wanting to be friends with you, is also seeing how they're having this behavior, how they're implementing this behavior with other people. How do they talk about their wife? How do they treat their wife? How do they treat the waiter? How do they treat the people around them? If they're talking shit about everybody, you're next.

Ramani Durvasula

01:21:48 — I love that you're bringing that up is watching how somebody treats the most vulnerable people around them can be revelatory, but you also have to be careful. It's interesting. Sometimes narcissistic people will actually be unctuous with people in like sort of like a person who is a server in a restaurant or a person valet parking their car and peel off the hundred dollar bills, like, because it's, it's an easy place to get validation. Oh, you're such a great guy.

Dhru Purohit

It's a performance.

Ramani Durvasula

01:22:14 — Right, it's performance. It's a performance.

So you're looking at it in its sort of totality. You're also looking at how you'll see them, and they'll be smiling at someone like, 'Hey, how you going? Yeah, you're a great guy.'

And then when they're gone, they're like, 'Ugh, I hate that person.' You're like, 'Woo, that was a quick switch.' And they're going to—and I'll tell you this—they're going to do it to you.

Dhru Purohit

01:22:32 — Wow.

Ramani Durvasula

01:22:32 — That I promise you.

Dhru Purohit

01:22:33 — You shared a very powerful story of—I heard you on another podcast, and while I was feverishly taking notes, you shared the story of how you were at a very big public speaking engagement, or like a stage.

I was imagining like almost like a TED stage or something, like a conference. And somebody went on stage, and they were so incredibly charming, and the audience was there. And they got off stage, and that person—you had an interaction with them, and all their charm that they put out there into the world, that they gave to everybody—you felt that they were just looking right through you. They literally couldn't even see you or be with you in that moment. They were literally just looking through you.

Ramani Durvasula

01:23:14 — And I think that that is a, listen, what that tells me is again, it's not an indictment of that person, but is that someone I want to get close to? No. And that's what we're because remember that again, this is on a continuum. That person's very wise, very smart. I'll continue to read their books. Do I want to have dinner with them? Hell no. Doesn't mean you can't learn from them, but have them in the right box, the right container. Yeah, but have them in the right box, exactly, and I think that that's what it is.

01:23:40 — We want people to be all things to us. It's an interesting part of our celebrity culture. We want celebrities to be normal people that are like us. They're not. They don't wash dishes. They don't do the normal, they don't wait in lines, they don't go through TSA, they're not doing that stuff, they're not like us. So let's stop trying to sort of, but I can be entertained by their song and I can be completely be entranced by their performance. I don't think I want them to be my friend.

Dhru Purohit

01:24:08 — Such an important point. You know, if you wouldn't mind, I'd love to just ask you when we started off this podcast, we were talking about how our lives can radically improve when we remove these narcissistic narcissistic individuals who are

taking years off of it. And you gave a whole list of things on a health level that people could be going through that you've personally seen that when they remove the toxic relationship in their life, there's been a big improvement.

01:24:37 — You've done major surgery in your own life over the years. These could be, you know, quasi business colleagues or individuals that you've had to deal with. I'm also getting the impression that maybe some family members or people from the content that you've shared. What did you notice with your own health and happiness on a personal level, when you either put the appropriate distance or removed those relationships from you?

Ramani Durvasula

01:25:02 — It improved precipitously. It improved precipitously. Don't get me wrong, I do sometimes feel grief, which I can only characterize as a heaviness, as a, this could have been different, but it's not. But I'll tell you something, you know, I'd had the experience some time ago, something really, really wonderful happened to me. Wonderful.

01:25:24 — It's the kind of thing I would have wanted to scream from rooftops, but there's someone close to me. And once upon a time, I would have told this person, and they would have been like, 'What? Huh?' Like, kind of a 'Who cares?' or they would have made it about them.

This time, I learned to not tell them. They still don't have any idea. Everyone else in the world knows about it; they don't. And others around me were like, 'You're not going to tell them?' And I'm like, 'Why? They're not going to listen.'

This is so precious to me. This is so important to me. I'm so happy about it. Why would I take that precious part of me? It was like losing 60 pounds overnight. It was such a freeing feeling.

People said, 'Why don't you feel grief that you couldn't tell them?' I said, 'Because I've already had my heart broken too many times.'

So at this point there was a where healing takes you is that there was a a caring for your For you and your child self your spiritual self and you don't get to know this and you know what you lose.

Because this was a wonderful thing for me to share with you and you were never shown you never showed me to be a deserving recipient of hearing this kind of thing for me. So no more for you. And that was very, very liberating for me. And, and I, and there's multiple, multiple that, that discernment piece, because it literally gave you that analogy.

It's like, you have these precious things in your house that are worth a gazillion dollars. And you keep giving them to people who just throw them on the ground and smash them and render them valueless.

01:26:54 — And that were meaningful to you. I'm like, I see my precious things on the shelf. And only very, very selected people get to participate in that I'm not taking them to people who will destroy these sacred parts of myself. So that to me has been incredibly freeing. And so I'm not wasting time, energy, and psychological bandwidth getting into the mud. Folks are like, aren't you sad that they know I'm not I'm happy about the thing I did.

01:27:18 — I'm really happy about it. That's my subjective experience. And those I trust and I feel safe with get to learn about it too. Other people might learn about it in a public forum. But I think that it's that once you really understand how things work, you stop thinking that a band saw is a potato peeler. If you keep treating the band saw as a potato peeler, you're going to get your fingers cut off.

Dhru Purohit

01:27:45 — You shared two super important words that you go deep into in your book. You shared the words “healing” and you also shared “acceptance”, and that there's a relationship between the two of those that you just described there. But I just wanted to highlight it because those two things are deeply connected to each other. Is that correct?

Ramani Durvasula

01:28:04 — Absolutely. I mean, you don't heal until you get to radical acceptance. And radical acceptance is, this is not going to change. This relationship is not—the jackpot's not coming out of the slot machine. This relationship is not magically going to turn a corner. It's not going to be, 'I'm just going to speak my truth, and you're going to get it.' There's no magical couples therapist that's going to turn this around. It's not going to change.

Now, acceptance doesn't mean you're okay with it. Acceptance doesn't mean you're signing off on it; it means you see it clearly. It is not going to change. It is not your fault. And when they do hurtful things, it's still going to hurt.

Some people say, 'Well, I accepted it; why does this still hurt?' I'm like, because they're saying something hurtful—that's how that works.

So, armed with that, you then walk through what I always say is a very long dark corridor called grief. And that grief corridor often leaves people thinking, 'Did I do this wrong? Because I feel absolutely terrible.'

01:28:57 — I said, just keep walking. I promise you the light's going to come on just as you round that bend. They come around that corner, and they say, 'Okay, I worked this through.'

Again, it is a heaviness. People who go through this say, 'I wish it had been different. I wish my parents had loved each other deeply. I wish I'd had a happier childhood. I

wish I'd been able to give my kids a happy marriage between their parents. I wish I had a different kind of career.'

We can have that wistfulness. But life hands us what it hands us.

01:29:24 — And I we see that, you know, that's no one lives a perfectly programmed life. And anyone who does it, sadly, we're just waiting for that other shoe to shoot a drop, it's always going to drop. That's the nature of life. And so that you and I always, that's why I always say like, I, whenever I'm at a party or anything, I'm always trying to find the people who've actually been through something because. They're always the most interesting people. People are like, my life's great and everything's great and I love everyone.

01:29:48 — I'm like, and then I'll go find the people who've suffered. I'm like, 'Come sit next to me.'

And so, but it's that acceptance—that's what starts the ball rolling. And it's the hardest part of this process because when a person finally gets their head around it, they just engage with all of this differently.

And we all carry this heavy stuff. Through that heavy stuff, we can find meaning and purpose through the suffering. Some people go on; they go back to school, become therapists. Some people become coaches. Some people volunteer in domestic violence programs.

Some people go back to school after being told they were dumb their entire lives. There are a lot of amazing things; people make art. But people take that pain, they take that suffering, and they take above all else the clarity.

Because I got to tell you, it's like batting with weights on. You take the weights off the bat, and all of a sudden you're bashing that thing over the back fence in the stadium. Because now, a lot of people never had weights on their bat.

01:30:46 — But once you get the weights off that bat, you are just Grand Slam after Grand Slam. Because you just are, there's a strength in you, and you're no longer wasting your time doing the heavy lift of the impossibility of trying to appease the narcissist.

Dhru Purohit

01:30:59 — As part of that healing journey, is part of this that people have a hard time imagining what their life would be like without this individual in it? And is that also part of this concept that you talked about earlier, which is the trauma bond? That I'm actually cannot imagine how my life would be, how great it could be? Or another side of it is, I'm scared of who am I without this person?

Ramani Durvasula

01:31:28 — Yeah, I mean, absolutely. I think that idea of, I'm scared of who am I without this person is a big part of the trauma-bonded process. Like, how am I gonna live without them? And what if the next person gets a better version of them? What if I'm alone forever? There's a lot of fears that come up. What are people gonna think of me if I'm no longer in a relationship? I'm no longer talking to my family. I'm no longer in this career. There's also a lot of shame-based stuff, right? So that's why going through therapy while a person navigates the space can be a tremendous help.

01:31:54 — Or being part of a support program or something like that where they understand that all of this feels very normal.

But a lot of people feel—because again, remember what narcissistic abuse is. It's the person gets subjugated. They get defined by the narcissist. They don't get to have a separate self, separate from the narcissist. Healing is your individuated, autonomous self finally emerging—your preferences, your wants, your likes. I'm not saying you go do everything you want, but that you get to have that.

You get to say, 'You know what? I happen to like, I don't know, fresh tomatoes on my pizza. Could we have that on half the pizza?' And that you slowly have people in your life who'll say, 'Sure, of course we can,' versus, 'What kind of dumb, stupid person has fresh tomatoes on their pizza?'

So before you know it—these are when I say we're doing the taking back of the self—this isn't some big existential journey.

Sometimes it's figuring out, what do you want on your pizza? How do you like the thermostat set? What time do you want to go to sleep?

All of these things get taken away from people in narcissistic relationships who don't get to have needs, who don't get to have wants, who don't get to have feelings. You get to cry when tears come up. Some people apologize for crying, like, 'What are you doing?' This is a reflexive process. You're feeling something. Be with the feeling. So it's a retraining of sorts.

Dhru Purohit

01:33:10 — One of the words that you talk about in your book that you help people understand that they are in this category and they need to be thinking about this word and potentially wearing this label is survivor. Why is that word so important to you? And what should people understand about it?

Ramani Durvasula

01:33:25 — I don't like the word victim. I think victim feels too passive to me. I think that because the survivor is somebody who's getting up and fighting the good fight every day, even if it's scraping a survivor. Remember, survival is never graceful. Survival is messy. Survival is sleeping on the floor and eating unhealthy things and dirt

under your eyes. When you think of what survival is, I always say to people, imagine you've done 30 hours of flight somewhere.

01:33:51 — By the end of that, you're like, a candy bar is dinner and you're wearing the same clothes for three days, and you're a mess, right? Well, that's like every day for a person in a narcissistic relationship.

So survival is strong, but it's messy, and we're not our best selves. When you think about somebody who might be surviving and they don't have enough to eat, right? Give you that example.

Are you really thinking about long-term financial planning or your aspirations? No, you're like, 'How am I going to get another meal in my belly?' That's what survival is, and that's what the experience is like while a person is in a narcissistic relationship and doesn't get it.

But I don't consider them victims because they're getting up every day and they're doing the things. Many people in narcissistic relationships are parenting their children well, and they're getting them off to school and they're getting themselves to work.

And in fact, one way I know narcissistic people surviving in narcissistic relationships are an interesting group: they're like, 'Yeah, no, I'm fine at work, fine when I'm hanging with my kids.'

01:34:41 — It's just when I'm with a narcissist where I start crumbling, right? So it's very, very linked to that person. Whereas in depression, for example, we'd see it would generalize over all areas of life. So, there is that sense that it is, that's what survival is. And then it's really getting to be, you know, I say it's from experiencer to survivor to thriver. An experiencer kind of has no idea what they're going through, right? The survivor's like, okay, I got to get through this and I'm going to fight the good fight, but I still don't fully know how to get through this.

01:35:12 — The thriver has now started giving themselves permission to individuate. They're not going deep anymore. They're not getting into the mud. They no longer have hope that the narcissistic person will change. And that's when we see a person starting to thrive.

The Pressure to Forgive in Narcissistic Relationships

Dhru Purohit

01:35:26 — You know, you have a really unique take on this word forgiveness. And when we started the conversation, we were talking about how society has kept the narcissist kind of thriving in some ways by maybe not having awareness of how bad the situation is.

01:35:48 — In some situations as you've shared, rewarding them in many instances, especially if they're a charismatic type of person that's out there. And also when somebody has been deeply wronged or has chosen to move on, there's also the

pressure for stepping into forgiveness. And I'd love for you to talk about forgiveness and really from two standpoints, the pressure that people feel for forgiveness, but also the role that self-forgiveness plays inside of this as part of the healing process.

Ramani Durvasula

01:36:26 — So, the pressure to forgive is a pressure that many, if not most, people in narcissistic relationships face, right? There's pressure to forgive by society as a whole.

We sort of watch people get on the news, and someone's killed three members of their family, and they'll say, 'I forgive that person.' And I think a lot of us are like, 'Really? What? Would I forgive them?'

Now, narcissistic relationships are interesting because they're like a daily offense. Like, every day, you get re-betrayed and re-betrayed, lied to and re-lied to, gaslighted and re-gaslighted.

01:36:54 — Forgiveness when you look at the dictionary definition it is to cease to feel resentment towards an offender. When people say I want to forgive like do you no longer resent them like no I resent them a lot they took my life away and I said then you're not even really forgiving them. But forgiveness is this, we kind of make it this really convenient one-size-fits-all band-aid. If you forgive, you'll feel lighter.

01:37:19 — I'm not so sure about that. That I think that forgiveness is a divine gift and when done right, when forgiveness is the correct experience, you forgive and the other person takes that forgiveness and it's a call to action. They do better. They change. They take responsibility. They may not get it perfect, but they take some responsibility. They don't act entitled to it. Narcissistic people feel entitled to forgiveness.

01:37:45 — But we're so programmed to forgive, we're so taught it's a virtue, it's a virtue, it's a virtue, that people literally feel like if I don't forgive, then I'm a bad person, which isn't true. And the research has shown that if you keep forgiving somebody who reoffends, it actually does psychological harm to you. So there's no sort of magic eraser that forgiveness is. Forgiveness is great if there's change, But if you and I'm forgiveness can even potentially work if you're having nothing further to do with the narcissist you say to them We're done.

01:38:14 — I'm not doing this anymore. You've got your wounds. I forgive you but peace out. I'm out do not ever get in touch with me again the narcissistic person would say well. Then you don't really forgive me because you don't want to have anything to do this thing. Oh, I forgive you plenty and I'm out because this is not good for me, right? We want our forgiveness to be a tidy Hallmark movie. We want it all that everything comes back together and everything's a happy ending not the case So I often tell survivors you can heal just fine if you don't forgive your in fact

01:38:42 — Many people have said my healing process became a lot smoother when I had permission to not forgive. However, the pressure to forgive comes from family

members, from other people in your network, from enablers, from pastors, rabbis, priests, imams, and whoever someone's interacting with in a religious context.

'You must forgive.' According to who? Some people never forgive. They say, 'No, this person ruined my life, and I have been picking up the pieces ever since.'

A person who has been taken out of their home and is marginally housed, who no longer has a place to live, and whose kids were taken away from them—why would that person forgive? Really, why would they?

What are you forgiving? 'No problem, you ruined my life, I forgive you.' It's a sucker bet. And I think it really devalues the painful process of the survivor.

01:39:38 — Some people will say, '20 years later, I was in a much better place; I guess I forgave them.' You know what a lot more people tell me? 'I'm indifferent towards them. I don't know that I forgive them, but I'm indifferent towards them. I don't care if they live, I don't care if they die, I just never want to hear from them again.'

They say, 'I'm not so sure I forgive them. I don't want to hear about them, I don't want to think about them. I don't want anything to do with them.'

Now, self-forgiveness—that's a much more important conversation. Many, many people blame themselves. They say, 'This was my bad choice, this was my bad handling of the situation. I stayed too long; I kept my kids in this harmful relationship.'

01:40:12 — So there are all these things that people castigate themselves for, blame themselves for.

Most people—I've worked with a lot of clients who are like 65, 70 and above—and they said nobody talked about this. Had they said if this framework of narcissism, if it existed now, had existed 30 years ago, I would have gotten out 30 years ago.

Thirty years ago, I still had the husband who was a pillar of the community and we lived in a nice home. I just thought marriages were hard, and I just kept putting on the good face. And they said, 'I would have gotten out 30 years ago.'

You see what I'm saying? So we're just—as in all areas of mental health—we now know more about trauma than we knew 60 years ago. We know more about mental health than we knew a hundred years ago. So we're making progress.

01:40:57 — This is a relatively new awareness, but The self-forgiveness is you didn't know you just didn't know what this was and there was nobody who was teaching you. You were you were doing your best. You're being a kind person. You're trying to solve the problem.

The things you were doing were admirable. You were just doing them with somebody who kept invalidating you who kept harming you and so that piece of it is helping people see that in a context, you did nothing wrong, someone harmed you and you were trying to stay alive.

01:41:26 — And we often have to make that, we have to repeat that message hundreds of times before it gets through to somebody to help them become more self-compassionate.

Dhru Purohit

01:41:35 — It seems that compassion and self-compassion is such an important part of the journey that even well before somebody might leave or have put the final nail in the coffin in terms of like putting distance or managing or sort of having somebody at arm's length in a way that kind of works for them, it seems to be that self-compassion and forgiveness is something that right after the awareness is up next.

01:42:02 — Just that, like, it's needed so early because there's always that voice that people have in their head that I caused this, that I was the person or I, you know, sure, maybe people might've had a tiny bit of part or things that they wish they didn't do differently, but this is a very extreme and different situation.

So if we don't practice the self-forgiveness early on, we may not even get to the place where we sort of remove the relationship or have it at a place that it's not impacting our life for the worse.

Ramani Durvasula

01:42:33 — But see it clearly. And it's very, very hard to do that because I have to always remind folks, you're not doing this in a vacuum. You're surrounded by family members. You're surrounded by enablers. You're surrounded by feel-good content and all this other stuff that leaves you wondering, am I the bad one? Like some people say, I'm a terrible person for even thinking my parent is narcissistic.

01:42:54 — Like they'll say, I'm like the dark, awful person for using this framework to think about someone, especially if their parent had a tough backstory, right? And this is one thing I talk about in the book is this concept of multiple truths. More than one thing can be true at the same time. You may have a parent and your parent emotionally abused you and your parent remains emotionally cruel and they're very demanding and they never valued you and they had a tough backstory and they were abused by their own parents. All those things can be true at the same time and in order to create a coherent narrative about a situation, you have to be able to hold all those things in truth, right?

01:43:27 — And it's not that, oh my, my parents are saint because they went through so much and then leaving out all that bad stuff that happened or just making it about like, I'm a bad person. I was a bad kid. That's why this happened to me. The creation of a coherent narrative about what happened to you. I see what happened. I see what and it wasn't but bringing it always to that absolutely crucial important final point. It wasn't okay that you can fully say I get my parents backstory And I understand what it was and I understand their struggles and the way they treated me was not okay

01:43:57 — That's the creation of a narrative that helps people not recreate those cycles with future generations.

Dhru Purohit

01:44:03 — Because that would literally be the worst expression of this that somebody's been so harmed by a narcissist that all those negative patterns that they've developed in their life, that they haven't brought forgiveness and awareness and had the right support system, that those negative patterns now are impacting the next generation. And we can all play a part in stopping that. And it starts with awareness. And this conversation has been the biggest part of that.

Ramani Durvasula

01:44:31 — I hope so.

Building Self-Protection in Narcissistic Relationships

Dhru Purohit

There are thousands of people that are listening to this conversation today who feel like they finally are being heard and recognized by someone who's giving them the truth about how to handle this, not a sanitized version.

Ramani Durvasula

01:44:46 — No, there's no sanitized version. And some people shift strategies.

They'll say, 'I'm not gonna have contact with them,' but then by not having contact for maybe even a couple of years, they'll say, 'Okay, I feel stronger now.' And they go back in. They'll say, 'Ooh, this has not changed at all,' but I feel more strong in myself.

And they'll see, as they bring their strong self back into those, for example, family systems, that the family mocks them and laughs at them. And they'll say, 'Okay, there's a reason I went no contact.' And they go back in.

01:45:10 — Like, I always call it going into the tiger's cage. When you go, you think, 'Well, am I reading this wrong?'

Like, okay, you see that cage? That could either be a cat in there, or that could be a tiger. If it's a cat, go pet it—I'm a cat person. If it's a tiger, it's gonna tear you apart.

Take a walk in the cage. Let me know how that works out for you. They're like, 'Yep, I got torn apart. Thanks, shouldn't have done that.'

No, I said, I often tell people, 'Yes, you should have.' Sometimes we need the reminders. Years.

Dhru Purohit

01:45:34 — The reality of life is that there are these zigs and zags that are there. Nothing is a perfect, Hey, I've learned about this topic in this conversation here, even with the world's foremost authority, and I'm going to handle it appropriately. So a big part of your work is creating resources in every sort of medium that are out there, including this book. Congratulations on it being an instant New York Times bestseller.

Ramani Durvasula

01:45:56 — Thank you.

Dhru Purohit

01:45:57 — That's amazing. Can you talk about some of those resources that are available for people, especially those who need some guidance along the journey of shifting this, not just for themselves, but for the family that they might be protecting or the individuals that might be protecting. What are some of those resources that you've created?

Ramani Durvasula

01:46:15 — So I have a healing program for people who are going through narcissistic, healing from narcissistic relationships may still be in them. It's a monthly program. If you go to my website, drramini.com, you can see more information on that. It's more of a deep dive. There's a community platform of people who are going through this. There's a monthly workshop. There's a monthly Q&A session. There is guided meditations, journal prompts. So it's a real chance for somebody to get in there and really, you know, spend as long as they want in the program to see if it fits for them and get a lot of their questions answered.

01:46:45 — I have a YouTube channel where I have daily content. That's content that comes up. That's free. You can go check with thousands. You've been making videos for years. Thousands of videos in there. Tons of great content. So you're gonna find your, definitely you're probably gonna find your topic there. I have three books on narcissism. The most recent one, *It's Not You, Identifying and Healing from Narcissistic People* is on healing, and it's a great place to start if that's what you wanna focus on.

01:47:09 — And very soon, or probably by the time this comes out, it already would be out, we have a new platform on Fireside. And there we have more of a interactive community, people who, if you're a member of our Fireside community, you have opportunities to engage directly with me or watch people engage directly with me, watching people's sort of narcissistic relationship situations kind of be broken down, there will be guests coming in.

So we have that launching. So you just go to Fireside and look up Dr. Ramani, or I think he called the Dr. Ramani Network, and you can see that and what all the all

the stuff we're doing there. And then, you know, again, follow me on Instagram and all social media at Dr. Ramani and any events or anything like that we have coming up.

Those will always be there for people to see so they can come and join and whether they're virtual or in person, we always have something going on. It seems like yes.

Dhru Purohit

01:47:58 — Well, that's the part of you creating a group of resources with your incredible team. So many for people who are truly hurting and there's not a lot of solutions that are out there for them. We'll have the links for all those in the YouTube caption in the podcast note as well. Dr. Ramani, I want to thank you so much for the opportunity to be able to have this conversation with you in person.

Ramani Durvasula

01:48:21 — Oh, it's my privilege. And I'm so grateful to be on this because given what you talk about in terms of health and longevity, we often don't think of toxic relationships as something that undercuts that. I can't think of anything that undercuts it more.

So I'm really glad to be on a platform and to a community where this is what they're tuning in for, because having healthy reciprocal relationships where we are seen, felt, heard, and witnessed might be the single most powerful health intervention we've got.

01:48:52 — And when we don't have that, and we have quite the opposite, people who are actively harming us, that can really set us back. And I have seen some real tragic stories there. So I honestly do believe whatever health behaviors you do, you do you. But this one thing, if you can clear the toxic stuff out of your social world, it's going to be a life changer.

Dhru Purohit

01:49:12 — Mike drop. Thank you.

Ramani Durvasula

01:49:15 — Thank you so much.

Dhru Purohit

01:49:16 — Thank you. Hey, YouTube, if you enjoyed what you just saw, keep watching for more great content on how to improve your brain and your life. I mean, if you want to be successful in life, you definitely either want to surround yourself with people who are also ambitious in the things that you enjoy and love and want to be good at.