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# Understanding Harmful Relationship Patterns

## How to think about repeated behaviour without diagnosing another person

Relationships can become distressing when criticism, intimidation, inconsistency, isolation, or dismissal occurs repeatedly. The most useful starting point is often to look at what happens, how often it happens, what follows, and how it affects your wellbeing.

A diagnostic label is not necessary to take your experience seriously. People can exhibit harmful behaviours without a personality-disorder diagnosis; likewise, having a diagnosis does not by itself establish that someone has been abusive.

Intermittent kindness can make an unhealthy pattern confusing. It may help to observe the whole pattern over time rather than interpreting one positive or negative event as the whole relationship.

### QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER

- [ ] Do I feel able to disagree?
- [ ] Can I express ordinary needs without retaliation?
- [ ] Do I feel free to maintain relationships outside this one?

NEXT RESOURCE: Start with Worksheet 01: Noticing Relationship Patterns. Choose observation over labeling.

Suggested reading: Durvasula, R. (2023). Dynamics of Narcissistic and Antagonistic Relationships. PESI training materials. | Durvasula, R. (2023). Working with the Fallout of Narcissistic Abuse. PESI training materials.

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# When You Doubt Your Own Experience

## Making room for uncertainty while rebuilding confidence

Repeated invalidation can lead to uncertainty about memories, emotions, or decisions. Some people find themselves rehearsing conversations, seeking reassurance, or wondering whether they are overreacting.

You do not need to resolve every disagreement to acknowledge your feelings. It can be useful to separate what you saw or heard, what you felt, what you interpreted, and what remains uncertain.

A therapist or trusted support person can offer a space to explore patterns thoughtfully without making claims about someone else's intentions or forcing an immediate decision.

### QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER

- [ ] I replay the same conversation repeatedly.
- [ ] I rely on others to approve small decisions.
- [ ] I struggle to describe what I need.

NEXT RESOURCE: Try Worksheet 02: Rebuilding Self-Trust, using a private and safe setting.

Suggested reading: Durvasula, R. (2023). Dynamics of Narcissistic and Antagonistic Relationships. PESI training materials. | Durvasula, R. (2023). Working with Clients Experiencing NA/ARS: An Antagonism-Informed Treatment Approach. PESI training materials.

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# Why Relationship Stress Can Affect the Body

## Understanding stress signals without requiring a trauma narrative

Stress can be experienced physically. People sometimes describe tension, disrupted sleep, a racing heart, numbness, difficulty concentrating, or an urge to withdraw, appease, or confront.

These reactions are not proof of a particular diagnosis. They are useful signals to bring to a qualified clinician, particularly if they are persistent, intense, or interfering with everyday life. Medical causes should also be considered when indicated.

Supportive grounding involves choice: you may look around the room, feel contact with a chair, or orient to a neutral sound. No exercise should be forced, and you can stop if it increases distress.

### QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER

- [ ] What signals tell me I need a break?
- [ ] Which environments feel more settled?
- [ ] What practices help without intensifying symptoms?

NEXT RESOURCE: Start with Worksheet 03: Stress Signals & Grounding. Worksheet 13 explores protective responses.

Suggested reading: Fisher, J. (2023). Trauma and Narcissism: Personality Disorders as Trauma-Related Disorders. PESI training materials. | Durvasula, R. (2023). Working with Clients Experiencing NA/ARS: An Antagonism-Informed Treatment Approach. PESI training materials.

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# Why Decisions About Relationships May Feel Complicated

## There is no one-size-fits-all timeline

Decisions about contact, staying, separation, or reconciliation may involve attachment, grief, caregiving, housing, finances, culture, immigration, disability, and safety. A person may have reasons to feel both hope and concern.

Pressure to make a quick decision can increase distress. Helpful support respects personal autonomy, recognizes unequal power or coercion, and helps the person consider options that are genuinely accessible.

If there is fear, intimidation, coercive control, or risk of retaliation, a qualified IPV service can assist with individualized safety planning. A self-help worksheet is not a substitute.

### QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER

- [ ] What matters to me?
- [ ] What constraints should a helper understand?
- [ ] Who can support me without pressuring me?

NEXT RESOURCE: Use Worksheet 05: Mixed Feelings and Worksheet 07: Culture, Power & Options.

Suggested reading: Durvasula, R. (2023). Being Culturally and Intersectionally Informed When Working with Clients Experiencing NA/ARS. PESI training materials. | Durvasula, R. (2023). Working with Clients Experiencing NA/ARS: An Antagonism-Informed Treatment Approach. PESI training materials. | Barrett, C. (2023). Narcissistic Abuse: Training for PESI Law and Ethics [slides in Legal and Ethical Considerations for Working with Narcissism and NA/ARS]. PESI training materials.

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# Grief, Self-Blame and Identity After Relational Harm

## Acknowledging both loss and resilience

People may grieve a relationship that continues, a hoped-for future, trust, family closeness, opportunities, or parts of themselves that were put aside. Grief can coexist with relief, anger, love, and uncertainty.

Self-blame can become habitual after chronic invalidation. Reflecting on context, practical constraints, and another person's responsibility can help create a more accurate and compassionate understanding of what happened.

Reconnection may begin with small experiences of choice: remembering interests, spending time with supportive people, or recognizing strengths that helped you survive difficult circumstances.

### QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER

- [ ] What losses deserve recognition?
- [ ] What strengths have I overlooked?
- [ ] What matters to me now?

NEXT RESOURCE: Use Worksheet 04: Softening Self-Blame, 08: Grief, and 09: Identity.

Suggested reading: Durvasula, R. (2023). Working with the Fallout of Narcissistic Abuse. PESI training materials. | Durvasula, R. (2023). Working with Clients Experiencing NA/ARS: An Antagonism-Informed Treatment Approach. PESI training materials.

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# Boundaries, Support and Healthy Relationships

## Supportive relationships make room for differences

A healthy relationship does not require constant agreement. Reciprocity, respect for preferences, meaningful repair, privacy, and the ability to express needs without intimidation are important signs of relational wellbeing.

A boundary can concern how you spend time, what contact you choose, or what support you seek. It does not always need to be stated aloud, particularly if confrontation could create risk.

Support may come from friends, community groups, culturally relevant resources, healthcare, legal information, or specialized violence services. You can choose what to share, when, and with whom.

### QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER

- [ ] Can I disagree without being intimidated?
- [ ] Who helps me feel respected?
- [ ] Which choice would support my wellbeing?

NEXT RESOURCE: Try Worksheet 06: Boundaries, 10: Supportive Relationships, and 11: Support Map.

Suggested reading: Durvasula, R. (2023). Dynamics of Narcissistic and Antagonistic Relationships. PESI training materials. | Durvasula, R. (2023). Working with Clients Experiencing NA/ARS: An Antagonism-Informed Treatment Approach. PESI training materials. | Durvasula, R. (2023). Being Culturally and Intersectionally Informed When Working with Clients Experiencing NA/ARS. PESI training materials.

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# Privacy, Digital Safety and Finding Help

## Using public resources safely and understanding their limits

A webpage and a PDF can leave traces in browser history, download folders, cloud backups, printer history, or shared devices. If another person monitors your device, consider whether accessing or saving a worksheet could increase risk.

A quick-exit button may change the visible page but does not erase browser or device history. Avoid entering sensitive details into public forms unless the website explains what information is collected, why, and how it is protected.

In immediate danger in Canada, call 911. Call or text 988 for a suicide crisis. In Ontario, 211 can help locate community services, and the Assaulted Women's Helpline is available at 1-866-863-0511. These public resources are not monitored clinical communication.

### QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER

- [ ] Is this device private?
- [ ] Would downloading a file create risk?
- [ ] Would talking with a live professional be safer?

NEXT RESOURCE: Choose online reading without saving, or contact a support service using a safe device.

Suggested reading: Barrett, C. (2023). Narcissistic Abuse: Training for PESI Law and Ethics [slides in Legal and Ethical Considerations for Working with Narcissism and NA/ARS]. PESI training materials. | Durvasula, R. (2023). Being Culturally and Intersectionally Informed When Working with Clients Experiencing NA/ARS. PESI training materials.