



IT'S

**Identifying and Healing from
NARCISSISTIC People**

NOT

Ramani Durvasula, PhD

YOU

Praise for *It's Not You*

“A compassionate road map and survival guide for people in narcissistic relationships that helps them understand how to heal and thrive during and after these challenging relationships.”

—Jay Shetty, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Think Like a Monk* and host of the *On Purpose with Jay Shetty* podcast

“A must read. Dr. Ramani will teach you how to heal from any toxic relationship. With her expert advice based on decades of research and clinical experience, she makes the impossible seem possible.”

—Mel Robbins, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The High 5 Habit* and host of *The Mel Robbins Podcast*

“In writing *It's Not You*, Dr. Ramani directly addresses victims of narcissistic abuse with targeted advice developed through years of clinical experience and research. I would highly recommend this book to anyone struggling in a relationship with a narcissist. Once you realize it's not you who is the problem, you can become the solution.”

—W. Keith Campbell, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Georgia and author of *The Narcissism Epidemic*

“*It's Not You* tackles a subject matter so wildly misunderstood and offers a path forward for those who have been or currently are in narcissistic relationships. With deep compassion, Dr. Ramani masterfully helps the reader shift from self-blame to seeing the picture clearly. What a profound gift it is to those who will see their experience written about in this book and feel a little less alone.”

—Vienna Pharaon, bestselling author of *The Origins of You* and host of the *This Keeps Happening* podcast

“Whether you are looking to avoid damaging relationships, leave one, or finally move on from one, Dr. Ramani has produced a work that is utterly essential for understanding the patterns we were never built to see coming. *It's Not You* is not just lifesaving, but life restoring. More than a way out, it's a way back—to yourself.”

—Matthew Hussey, host of the *Love Life with Matthew Hussey* podcast

“Emotionally abusive relationships take away our voice and our power, and Dr. Ramani gives us the tools and teaches all of us how to take ourselves back and feel whole again.”

—Debra Newell, author of *Surviving Dirty John*

“Dr. Ramani is one of the most respected experts on healing and narcissism. In this important book, I'm grateful she includes the often unseen world of grief and narcissism.”

—David Kessler, author of *Finding Meaning*

“What sets Dr. Ramani apart is her valuable emphasis on healing from the damaging effects of a narcissist's destructive behavior. With a direct and compassionate approach, she reminds us that it is

possible to heal. As always, Dr. Ramani gives comfort and validation to the ‘lions.’ *It’s Not You* is a gift.”

—Jenifer Faison, host of the *Betrayal* podcast

“*It’s Not You* is, simply put, brilliant. In straightforward, clear language, Dr. Ramani has created a framework for deeply understanding the complexities of, and healing from, this most insidious form of abuse. She challenges misconceptions and glaring gaps in knowledge of current paradigms in traditional psychology and with compassion and refreshing candor, guides us through hell—and back to our true selves.”

—Mark Vicente, NXIVM whistleblower and director of *Empathy Not Included*

It's Not You

*Identifying and Healing
from Narcissistic People*

Ramani Durvasula, PhD

THE OPEN FIELD | PENGUIN LIFE

VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © 2024 by Dr. Ramani Durvasula

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

The Open Field/A Penguin Life Book

THE OPEN FIELD is a registered trademark of MOS Enterprises, Inc.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Durvasula, Ramani, author.

Title: It's not you: identifying and healing from narcissistic people /
Ramani Durvasula, PhD. Other titles: It is not you

Description: [New York] : The Open Field/Penguin Life, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references
and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2023040075 (print) | LCCN 2023040076 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593492628
(hardcover) | ISBN 9780593492635 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Narcissism. | Autonomy.

Classification: LCC BF575.N35 D877 2024 (print) | LCC BF575.N35 (ebook) |
DDC 155.2/32—dc23/eng/20231109

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023040075>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023040076>

Cover art and design: Lynn Buckley

Designed by Alexis Farabaugh, adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen

All names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

Neither the publisher nor the author is engaged in rendering professional advice or services to the individual reader. The ideas, procedures, and suggestions contained in this book are not intended as a substitute for consulting with your physician or licensed mental health practitioner. All matters regarding your health require medical supervision. Neither the author nor the publisher shall be liable or responsible for any loss or damage allegedly arising from any information or suggestion in this book.

pid_prh_6.3_146189840_c0_r0



THE OPEN FIELD

Dear Reader,

Years ago, these words attributed to Rumi found a place in my heart:

*Out beyond ideas of
wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

Ever since, I've cultivated an image of what I call the "Open Field"—a place out beyond fear and shame, beyond judgment, loneliness, and expectation. A place that hosts the reunion of all creation. It's the hope of my soul to find my way there—and whenever I hear an insight or a practice that helps me on the path, I love nothing more than to share it with others.

That's why I've created The Open Field. My hope is to publish books that honor the most unifying truth in human life: We are all seeking the same things. We're all seeking dignity. We're all seeking joy. We're all seeking love and acceptance, seeking to be seen, to be safe. And there is no competition for these things we seek—because they are not material goods; they are spiritual gifts!

We can all give each other these gifts if we share what we know—what has lifted us up and moved us forward. That is our duty to one another—to help each other toward acceptance, toward peace, toward happiness—and my promise

to you is that the books published under this imprint will be maps to the Open Field, written by guides who know the path and want to share it.

Each title will offer insights, inspiration, and guidance for moving beyond the fears, the judgments, and the masks we all wear. And when we take off the masks, guess what? We will see that we are the opposite of what we thought—we are each other.

We are all on our way to the Open Field. We are all helping one another along the path. I'll meet you there.

Love,
Maria Shriver

To my mother, Sai Kumari Durvasula—and the story still to come.

*In memory of my ~~pat~~-grandmother Gunupud~~u~~ Venkamma and the grandmothers who came ~~before~~
her.*

To all survivors of emotionally abusive ~~relationships~~.

Within tears, find hidden laughter.
Seek treasures amid ruins, sincere one.

RUMI

Every betrayal contains a perfect moment, a coin stamped heads or tails with salvation on the other side.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER

CONTENTS

[Preface](#)

[Introduction: How Did We Get Here?](#)

Part I: The Narcissistic Relationship

[1. Clarifying Narcissism](#)

[2. Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Narcissistic Relationship](#)

[3. The Fallout: The Impact of Narcissistic Abuse](#)

Part II: Recognition, Recovery, Healing, and Growth

[4. Understand Your Backstory](#)

[5. Embrace Radical Acceptance](#)

[6. Grief and Healing from Narcissistic Relationships](#)

[7. Become More Narcissist Resistant](#)

[8. Heal and Grow When You Stay](#)

[9. Rewrite Your Story](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Resources](#)

[Notes](#)

[Index](#)

Preface

Once upon a time, an eight-year-old girl sat on the floor of a stuffy cafeteria in an elementary school in New England and watched as a troupe of circus performers from New York City gave a show at her school. It was the 1970s, an era before any kind of multicultural awareness, and the little girl with her foreign name, brown skin, and two tight braids in her hair had taught herself to be invisible. The circus chose their volunteers from the gaggle of children, one boy to be an elephant, a girl to be a juggler's assistant, the luckiest boy was the ringmaster.

Finally, the circus folks held up a costume; it was satin, a deep shade of purple, festooned with fringe and sequins. All of the girls swooned, including the little girl with the braids. Every girl's hand shot up except hers. "Pick me, please, *please* pick me," they shrieked. *How did they have the courage*, thought the girl with the braids. *Why weren't they afraid?* The head of the troupe ignored the children with their hands up and chose the little girl with the braids. She trembled and put her head down, tears welling up, and quietly said, "No thank you, sir." He looked at her and gently asked, "Are you sure?" And she quietly nodded. The girl sitting next to her grabbed at the opportunity and wore the costume with pride. He asked the girl with the braids what part she wanted, and she said she would be content as part of the horse's costume where she would be hidden. She would spend years thinking about what it would have felt like to wear that purple-sequined wonder of a dress, but that day she was so frightened of the taunts of her classmates . . . and simply of being seen.

From the very beginning of her life, she had internalized the message that her wants, dreams, and needs weren't worthy of being seen, and that she wasn't enough. Her kind and compassionate mother's dreams had been

thwarted and silenced, and the little girl felt she didn't have the right to them, either.

Until she did.

While I still may not own a fabulous purple-sequined dress, I recognize that we can pull ourselves out of the stories of the narcissistic people who defined us, silenced us, clipped our wings, taught us our dreams were grandiose, filled us with shame, and for a time, stole our joy. That we can have love stories, success stories, and happiness, yet comprehend that there will still be dark nights of the soul, and that the shadow of self-doubt remains a fellow traveler. And we can pay it forward, and let folks know that what happened was real and that they are enough. I did, and every day I see more and more people who do. We can begin to break intergenerational cycles of devaluation and invalidation and psychological self-harm. These stories must be told.

I still don't know if I would have the courage to grab hold of that spangled dress today, but I'd like to think that the little girl with the braids and the big brown eyes, and the name no one could pronounce, would have rocked it.

And from my little girl heart to all of you . . . I know you can, too.

Introduction: How Did We Get Here?

Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor,
never the tormented.

ELIE WIESEL

9:00 a.m.

Carolina has two children and was betrayed and cheated on by her husband several times during their twenty-year marriage, including with friends and neighbors. After he denied it repeatedly, and then after enduring his rage for her “paranoid accusations,” she was told the affairs were her fault for making him feel like he wasn’t important. She would minimize her career so he felt “safe.” She struggles with missing what she believed was the beautiful life and family they created, with feeling not enough, believing that maybe she was misunderstanding him and the situation, knowing it was breaking her heart every time he criticized her and betrayed her trust. Carolina didn’t understand it; she has parents who had been happily married for forty-five years until her father died. She believed in family and now with the impending divorce, she felt she had failed. She was also experiencing regular panic attacks and debilitating anxiety, and sometimes ruminated about a reconciliation.

10:30 a.m.

Nataliya has been married for fifty years to a man who told her that she was being “ridiculous” for expecting so much of him when she had cancer. He said it was “disruptive” and throwing him off because now he was supposed to feel sad for her and upend his busy schedule to pick her up from chemotherapy appointments. She found it difficult to walk after developing neuropathy following years of cancer treatment, and he would shame her and call her “the empress” for asking to be dropped off in front of a restaurant instead of walking five blocks on a cold night. However, they have adult children and grandchildren, and a life filled with travel and family time. Nataliya doesn’t want to be the one responsible for messing up a lifestyle that everyone is enjoying, and she acknowledges that on more than a few days, she enjoys her husband’s company—they still have a decent sex life and a shared history. Despite her having both medical and law degrees, he treats her like a personal assistant. She has struggled with ongoing health conditions, self-blame, and shame, and has become socially isolated from everyone except her close family.

1:00 p.m.

Rafael’s father has compared him unfavorably to his brother since childhood, and he works constantly with the fantasy that once he makes enough money, he will get noticed. His father often perceived him as weak, would take some glee in telling him about his brother’s latest successes (Rafael had long since distanced from his brother), and had been emotionally abusive toward his wife, Rafael’s mother. This resulted in a tremendous psychological toll on her, which Rafael believed resulted in her premature death. Rafael knows that his grandfather did the same thing to his father—it was just how it was for them culturally—and he also wanted to make allowances for the racial biases and limitations his father and grandfather faced throughout their lives. Rafael has not been able to sustain

successful intimate relationships and keeps telling himself, “If I can just show Dad my success, then I will be okay and ready to start the rest of my life.” Rafael works around the clock, relies on a mix of drugs and remedies to sleep and to get going, rarely socializes, and craves social contact, but says it feels “indulgent” to go on vacation or hang out with people when there is so much work to do.



LET’S CALL THIS a hypothetical day in my office. Over the years, having listened to enough of these stories, it became clear that in just about every case like Rafael’s, the parent would remain invalidating, and with folks like Carolina and Nataliya, their partners would continue to blame them. But it wouldn’t have been helpful for me to tell Rafael, Carolina, and Nataliya up front that the people in their lives would likely continue their harmful behavior. Instead, our work became about teaching them what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior and what healthy relationships are about, while creating a safe space for them to explore their feelings, these relationships, and their true selves. We had to make sense of the confusion and explore why they were blaming themselves for something they didn’t do or feeling guilty when they were doing nothing wrong. As a therapist, I would have found it easier to just focus treatment only on the anxiety, health issues, depression, confusion, dissatisfaction, frustration, helplessness, social isolation, and obsessive work tendencies and not include the context. That’s what we are taught to do: focus on the maladaptive patterns of the person in the office instead of what’s going on around them.

But there was something else happening. Week after week, my clients’ panic and sadness ebbed and flowed alongside the patterns and behavior within their relationships. It became clear that the relationships were the horse and the anxiety that got them into therapy was the cart. I was struck by the similarities in so many clients’ stories, yet these clients were very different people with different histories. But where they didn’t vary was that all of them felt they were to blame for their situations—they doubted

themselves, ruminated, felt ashamed, were psychologically isolated, confused, and helpless. Increasingly, they censored themselves in these relationships and became progressively more numb and restrained to avoid the criticism, contempt, or anger from these challenging people in their lives. They were trying to change themselves with the hope that this would change this person and relationship.

There was another significant similarity: the behaviors that were happening in their relationships. Regardless of whether it was a spouse, partner, parent, other family member, adult child, friend, colleague, boss—my clients consistently shared stories of being invalidated or shamed for having a need or for expressing or being themselves. Their experiences, perceptions, and reality itself were regularly challenged. They were blamed for the problematic behavior of these people in their lives. They felt lost and isolated.

Yet at the same time, all of them shared that it wasn't bad all the time. There was sometimes laughter, good sex, enjoyable experiences, dinners, shared interests and histories, even love. In fact, just when things seemed as though they were becoming untenable, there would be a decent day, just enough to reseed the self-doubt. I gave my clients what had helped me in my own healing—validation and education. Focusing on their anxiety without educating them about the patterns within these relationships was like fixing engine problems by putting air in the tires. And those engine problems always seemed to track back to the same place: narcissistic relationships.

There is a proverb that says *Until the story of the hunt is told by the lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter*. The person who holds the narrative holds the power. Until now, we have only told the story of the hunter. Books about narcissism tend to talk about narcissists. We are deeply curious about these charming people who seem to get away with so much bad and hurtful behavior with so few consequences. We are compelled to understand why they are ostensibly so successful and why they do what they do. As much as we may not like narcissism, we glorify people with these personality styles—they are our leaders, heroes, entertainers, and

celebrities. Unfortunately, they are also our parents, partners, friends, siblings, children, bosses, and neighbors.

But what about the lion? What about the person whom the hunter goes after or harms?

Much of what's written about narcissism tends to forget the more important part of the story: *What happens to the people who are in the wake of the narcissist?* How are people affected by folks with narcissistic personalities and the behaviors? When people are hurt, there is a preoccupation with understanding the “why”—as if this could somehow ease their pain (it doesn't). We become so curious about the hunter in an almost obsessive zeal to understand why they do what they do. Why would someone lack empathy or gaslight or manipulate or lie so skillfully or rage so suddenly? But in focusing on why people with narcissistic personalities do what they do, we lose sight of what happens to the people who fall in love with, have children with, are raised by, are related to, work for, work with, get divorced from, share apartments with, become friends with, and raise narcissists. What happens to them?

The short answer: it's not good.

This is an uncomfortable conversation. You don't want to cast aspersions on the people you love, admire, respect, and care about. It's easier to take responsibility for your difficult relationships yourself, or write it off to the ebbs and flows of life, rather than accept that you are facing predictable, unchangeable, and harmful patterns from someone you love or respect. As a psychologist who has worked with hundreds of survivors of narcissistic abuse, who maintains a program for thousands of more survivors, and who has written books and created thousands of hours of content on this topic, I grapple with whether it is even a worthwhile conversation to focus on narcissism, because the issue is really the harm the narcissistic person's behavior causes you.

Can we separate the personality from the behavior if the personality is not likely to change? Does it matter if their harmful behavior is intentional or not? Can you heal without understanding narcissism? And most

importantly, can you heal from these relationships? This book will explore those complex questions.

There is pushback from people who ask me, “How do you know the partner/parent/boss/friend is narcissistic?” Fair question. When I am working with a client in therapy, I have typically not met the other people in their lives, but I am getting a detailed history, often reading emails and text messages that have been sent to them by the antagonistic person and witnessing the impact on my client. I use the term *antagonistic relational stress* to describe what happens to survivors of these relationships, and I prefer to characterize the behavior of the psychologically harmful person in my clients’ lives as antagonistic, which is a broader and less stigmatized term than narcissistic. This is the term I use when teaching other professionals about these patterns, because it captures the breadth of antagonistic behaviors and tactics that we observe in narcissism—manipulation, attention-seeking, exploitativeness, hostility, arrogance—but also in other antagonistic personality styles, such as psychopathy, and positions it as a unique stress that antagonistic relationships evoke. But the narcissistic cat is out of the bag, and the term *narcissistic abuse* is familiar to most of you, though I will also use the term *antagonistic* throughout this book to capture the full breadth of these patterns.



YOU DON'T GET into this work unless it is personal, and yes, for me, it's personal. I have encountered narcissism-induced invalidation, rage, betrayal, dismissiveness, manipulation, and gaslighting in my family relationships, intimate relationships, workplace relationships, and friendships. It hit me in the gut as I listened to the pain being shared by the clients I was working with, then going into my own therapy and sharing my own pain, and slowly realizing it was my story, too. Narcissistic abuse has changed the course of my career and my life. I was so gaslighted, I thought up was down, that I was to blame, that my expectations for people were not realistic, and that I was not worthy of being seen, heard, or noticed. It was foundational for me, and that fear of grasping the purple dress morphed into

feeling unworthy of success, love, or happiness as an adult. There was no penny-drop moment, no singular defining relationship. Narcissistic abuse happened in many different relationships and ways in my life, so I believed this must be me, it can't be all of these other situations in my life. I never learned about narcissistic abuse in graduate school; I didn't think that this confusing and abusive behavior was a thing until I finally saw it clearly. I spent years grieving and then wishing I could get back the years I wasted in rumination and regret. I felt guilty and disloyal for viewing family members and people I loved as narcissistic. I slowly set boundaries, radically accepted that none of this behavior would change, stopped trying to change the antagonistic people in my life, and disengaged from them and their behavior. I lost relationships that once mattered to me and faced criticism for violating ancient cultural norms about family loyalty and current norms about needing to figure out a way to get along with people who have sharp elbows. I now realize that if you spend enough time with sharp elbows, you will end up bleeding to death.

A little over twenty years ago, I was supervising research assistants who were reporting back about certain patients in outpatient clinics wreaking havoc on nurses, physicians, and everyone else who worked there through their entitled, dysregulated, contemptuous, and arrogant behavior. That observation led me to start a research program looking at personality, particularly narcissism and antagonism, and how it affects health.

Simultaneously, I have had the privilege of hearing the stories of thousands of people who have endured these relationships. Unfortunately, I kept hearing that many times the partners, family members, friends, colleagues, and even therapists were blaming the person experiencing the abusive behavior for being too sensitive, not trying harder, being too anxious, not being more forgiving, staying, leaving, being judged as harsh for using the term *narcissist*, and not communicating more clearly. I have read descriptions of therapist-training programs that pushed back on clients who believed their families or relationships were toxic, or believed clients who came into therapy to talk about manipulative relationships were simply whining. There were countless books and articles written about narcissistic