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Relationship Experiences of Long-Term Partners of Individuals with Narcissistic Traits

Tamara Betty-Jean Knott
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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Tamara B. Knott

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Relationship Experiences of Long-Term Partners of Individuals with Narcissistic Traits

by

Tamara B. Knott

MA, City University, 2008

BA, Queens University, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology, Teaching Track

Walden University

February 2023

Abstract

The phenomenon of narcissism is well-documented and has garnered much attention from the scientific community. However, a facet of this subject that has been largely unstudied involves the consequences that narcissistic relationships have on intimates. Typically, an individual with narcissistic traits (INT) most negatively affects the romantic partner. Still, there has been very little in the way of academic knowledge, understanding of partner experiences, or how to help from a mental health standpoint. Research has implied that partnering with an INT entails distinct forms of emotional abuse (EA), resulting in the development of unique psychological distress. This qualitative narrative study was designed to explore the experiences of and give voice to 29 former long-term partners of INTs, focusing on the course of the relationships and recovery, evolving self-views during that time, and meaning-making around relationship longevity. Data were collected via semi structured interviews and examined using thematic narrative analysis. Findings were informed by two associated models, that of investment and affect theories of social exchange, owing to the interactional nature of a romantic dyad. Results revealed five themes related to these distinctive relationship trajectories: intense foundation building, unveiling INT façades, cyclical EA and wooing phases, coping and recovery, followed by hindsight wisdom. Increased understanding of the partners' experiences promotes positive social change by creating awareness and visibility of the impact on partners, contributing to the knowledge pool for psychological educators and clinicians, allowing the possibility of development and implementation of targeted clinical interventions, and providing future directions for study.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research to all the individuals who volunteered to tell their important stories of being partnered with an individual with narcissistic traits. You are all true survivors, and I admire your strength, resilience, perseverance, and dedication to recovery. This information is so crucial for individuals who are or who have gone through similar experiences and will hopefully help others to feel less alone, lost, and confused. Educators and clinicians will now have such rich material to disseminate, to create appropriate interventions for helping others in identifying these phenomena and for increased understanding, and directions for future research. Thank you for your wisdom!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Narcissism as a construct has been heavily researched in recent history and has held fascination within the realm of popular media. This increased attention perhaps reflects the controversial viewpoint that rates of narcissism are rising and are influenced by everything from parenting trends to popular culture (Gibson et al, 2018; Lewis, 2018). What is often ignored by academic literature, however, is that narcissism does not just affect the people afflicted, but greatly impinges upon those individuals who are in regular contact with narcissists. At first blush, narcissists may be talented at drawing people to them based on their extraverted and charming characteristics, however, the longer and more deeply someone engages in a relationship with a narcissist, the more these negative traits become apparent (Lamkin et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2016). Kacel et al. (2017), and many other researchers intimate that as a product of narcissism, the greatest deficit is in the realm of interpersonal functioning. In fact, research suggests that it is the romantic partners who are most negatively affected by narcissistic behaviors to the point that personal wellbeing can be jeopardized (Day et al., 2019; Lamkin et al., 2015).

With somewhat controversially reported increases in the rates of narcissism and the well-established sexually prolific nature of narcissism (Schmitt et al., 2017; Twenge et al., 2010; Wetzel et al., 2017), it is likely that large numbers of unwitting romantic partners will be drawn into relationships which are unbalanced and narcissistic-centric. Unfortunately, with the difficulties in treating narcissism (Kacel et al., 2017), and low levels of academic understanding of this unique form of emotional abuse from romantic partners' perspectives, it is currently impossible to fully educate students and clinicians

within the psychological realm about the phenomenon with any degree of certainty, and there is very little to no credible information about how to help those individuals who may have developed unhealthy dyads with a narcissist. Since it is rare that a narcissist will seek voluntary treatment or are likely to be resistant (Kacel et al., 2017), it is the partners for whom complete understanding and effective interventions may be the most crucial in the noncriminal, clinical psychology fields.

This current research focuses on illuminating romantic partners' experiences of consorting with individuals with higher levels of narcissistic traits (INT) through telling their stories of their relationships from beginning to end. The goal of collecting these narratives is to provide a balance to the information that currently exists in narcissistic research and to provide a voice to those who have not been at the forefront of academic attention.

This chapter will review the background of the study, problem statement, and purpose that led to the research questions, the theoretical base, and the nature of the study. The boundaries of this research are also discussed in terms of the definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

Background

Much attention and fascination have been focused on the topic of narcissism in media and elsewhere. Likewise, research in the past 20 years has provided a comprehensive picture of the narcissists themselves, the origins of narcissism, their behavior, and how they interact with their environment and others. Of less public knowledge, the people who become close to the narcissists can be highly affected by their

behavior, often in gravely detrimental ways. Unfortunately, academic literature is only just beginning to focus on individuals left in narcissists' wakes, and these effects are generally described in the context of research around the narcissist. Often, as this study demonstrates, it is the romantic partner who suffers the most. To understand how the romantic partner experiences a relationship with an INT, it is also important to acknowledge the unique behaviors which might be present in an INT-PNT (partner of an INT) dyad. This section will provide a brief review of narcissism and the narcissistic relationship; however, a more comprehensive appraisal is provided in Chapter Two.

Narcissism

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2013) defines the diagnosis of narcissism in the DSM-5 through a combination of specific personality characteristics and behaviors, which are arguably not outside of the realm of normal human behavior, but rather are expressed at much higher or lower levels than what is considered typical. These include a penchant for grandiosity (Chatterjee et al., 2017), fantasies of unlimited success (Kanske et al., 2017), belief in their own special nature (APA, 2013), need for high levels of admiration (Chatterjee et al., 2017), entitlement (Cai et al., 2018), exploitativeness (Cai et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2004), low empathy (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2014; Di Pierro, et al., 2017), enviousness or belief that others envy them (Hepper et al., 2014), and arrogance (Di Pierro et al., 2017) or nonextraversion and heightened neuroticism for the vulnerable subtype (Kaufman et al., 2020). The crucial characteristics necessary for diagnosis, according to the American Psychological Association (APA), include grandiosity, need for admiration, and lower empathy.

In addition, there is a strong sensitivity to perceived slights that can result in outsized aggressive reactions (APA, 2013; Brewer et al., 2018). For romantic partners, there may be a realization that relationships' central focuses are nonreciprocal and are primarily in service to the narcissists' needs (APA, 2013). Also, concerns and interests which are given attention in the relationship revolve around what is significant to the INT, leaving areas that may be of import to the PNTs neglected (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2014; Di Pierro et al., 2017; Hepper et al., 2014). Following this, INTs expect that others will recognize their superiority, even without evidence of achievement or ability, and become hostile or derogating when admiration or special services are not given (Chatterjee et al., 2017; Di Pierro et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2017). These reactions are most common when INTs believe themselves to be of higher status in relation to someone else (Back et al., 2013; Brewer et al., 2018).

Subclinical Narcissism

In academic research studies, the term *narcissism* is generally used to describe subclinical narcissism. The distinction between the diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) and that used in the research literature is that participants have typically not received a complete diagnostic assessment that might otherwise be performed in a clinical setting. Instead, participants would be defined by their results on such assessments as the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI) or the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), for example. The PNI (Pincus, 2013; Pincus et al., 2009) has been a well-validated self-report measure of narcissism and the most recent assessment product to be considered an important measurement of narcissism (Diguier et al., 2015;

Miller et al., 2014; Schoenleber et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2012; You et al., 2013). Of special note, this assessment delves into the distinction between grandiose and vulnerable subcategories of narcissism, something which previous assessments, including the NPI, do not. For this reason, this assessment is appropriate for capturing dimensions of narcissism that may have escaped attention in the past, however, they are an important facet of the study of narcissistic traits.

The NPI has long been the gold standard threshold measure for academic research around narcissism. Fossati et al. (2017) and Raskin et al. (1988) have shown that the NPI is a valid measure of narcissism. In fact, Emmons (1987) concluded that the NPI is also a valid measure for determining narcissistic traits in nonclinical populations and that the assessed factors closely correlate to DSM-III categories for NPD. The above researcher established that the dimensions of narcissism show parallel behaviors for the clinical versus nonclinical narcissistic populations.

For the purposes of this study, the term ‘narcissism’ or ‘narcissist’ will likewise generally describe nonclinical or subclinical narcissism (SN) or as Jonason et al. (2009) and Cai et al. (2018) term SN, normal or trait narcissism.

Partners of Narcissists

While research is generally sparse regarding the partners of narcissists, in recent years, there have been a few quantitative studies focusing mainly on partners’ personality traits. Some support has been demonstrated for the concept of homophily, in which partners exhibit similar traits to the INT and an overall elevated level of narcissism. However, many of the associations uncovered in that research showed correlations in

what could generally be considered to be the more positive qualities of narcissism, such as agentic and extraverted behaviors (Lamkin et al., 2015; Lavner et al., 2016; Sleep et al., 2017). Homophily research, however, does not distinguish between those relationships which might be longer-lasting and those which extinguish quickly, nor examine wide ranges of participant age and stage.

There is a great deal of evidence that suggests that narcissistic qualities serve to create a faster demise of an intimate relationship and that dual-narcissistic dyads may end the most quickly (Foster et al., 2011; Lamkin et al., 2015; Lavner et al., 2016). While INTs may endorse the desire for partners with certain agentic characteristics, research shows that they are much more likely to have more sustainable relationships with individuals who possess more intrinsically focused traits as well, such as higher levels of empathy (Adams et al., 2015; Campbell, 1999; Seidman, 2016). Also important for longer-term success in relationships with INTs appears to be a willingness to engage in fulfilling ‘narcissistic supply’ for the INT, which means providing them with consistently high levels of admiration and praise (something which a narcissist may not be consistently willing or able to offer).

The Narcissistic Relationship

INTs often have certain social advantages that attract others and can create success in certain realms. For instance, over-evaluation of the self and one’s abilities can result in an outward appearance of confidence and competency (Rauthmann, 2011). Indeed, many INT behaviors could be considered very socially effective, particularly those that relate to agentic and extraverted dimensions, such as charisma, attention to

image, or leadership (Ahmadian et al., 2017; Back et al., 2013). These qualities can be important in the initial attraction stages of a relationship as well, however, they may fail to provide a strong foundation for longer-term relationship success, particularly when contrasted with some of the more negatively associated behaviors exhibited by INTs. INTs, whether the grandiose or vulnerable subtype, generally have a strong facility in image management.

Particular features of the strain that can be caused by higher levels of narcissistic traits within a relationship emerge mainly from a lack of empathy, a game-playing love style, self-centeredness, entitlement, exploitation, and low levels of agreeableness exhibited by the INT (Day et al., 2019; Fatfouta et al., 2017; Horan et al., 2015; Lamkin et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2014; Ye et al., 2016). These characteristics not only serve to create rapid decreases in relationship satisfaction and enjoyment but are hardest on the partner in terms of personal wellness (Brummelman et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2011; Keller et al., 2014; Lamkin et al., 2015). The unique and often-seen forms of emotional and psychological abuse that are perpetrated in these relationships due to the cluster of narcissistic traits can cause high levels of distress for the PNT and have the potential to result in complex wellness outcomes similar to physical abuse (Crossman et al., 2016; Estefan et al., 2016; Gerwartz-Meydan et al., 2017). These specific outcomes are likely seen due to the narcissistic dimensions of entitlement and exploitation (Gerwartz-Meydan et al., 2017; Warrener et al., 2017).

While researchers have addressed the phenomena of narcissism extensively, specific features of the narcissistic relationship and some personality trait assessments of

partners, most of the above past research is about and through the lens of the narcissist themselves. The literature points to the concept that the partners of narcissists are generally the people most affected by the narcissistic traits, however, their experiences of such have been traditionally ignored in academia. The literature is currently barren in terms of creating understanding about this unique form of relationship and how the partner may experience it. This study focuses on providing a voice to these stories in terms of providing rich descriptions of partnering with a narcissist and, attributions and meaning making around longevity and subsequent termination of the relationship.

Problem Statement

The literature regarding the dynamics of the narcissistic relationship show that this dyad is generally highly unhealthy for both partners involved, and that relationship satisfaction typically decreases over time much faster than for average couples due to narcissistic traits (Back et al., 2013; Furnham et al., 2013; Keller et al., 2014; Lamkin et al., 2017; Lavner et al., 2016; Määttä et al., 2012; Wurst et al., 2017). INTs may not value or possess the communal characteristics important for maintaining long-term relationships. However, in the early stages of a relationship, the INT can be highly compelling because they exhibit agentic qualities such as charm and extroversion (Wurst et al., 2017).

The partnership with someone with narcissistic traits is characterized as an object-relationship, in which the nonnarcissistic romantic partner is assessed simply by their current value to the narcissistic partner (Määttä et al., 2012). Partners of INTs are often idealized in the initial stages of a relationship by the INT, and therefore, PNTs rarely see

potential undesirable traits exhibited by the INT at first. However, the INT's exhibition of disdain and contempt eventually grows for the PNT as the relationship continues, and the undesirable INT characteristics begin to emerge in more magnified ways (Keller, 2014; Konrath et al., 2014; Seidman, 2016). This occurs primarily because INTs tend to choose partners based on more superficial and idealized characteristics. However, they are disappointed to discover that they are partnered with a more complex individual who has needs of their own.

Typical negative narcissistic behaviors include lying, cheating, manipulation (including gaslighting, which is misleading a partner into questioning their own judgement or understanding of a situation [Abramson, 2014; Gass et al., 1988; Stern, 2018])). There is typically intolerance, selfishness, aggressiveness, hostility, and self-centeredness (Furnham et al., 2013; Keller, 2014; Tortoriello et al., 2017). In addition, INTs are shown to have a "game-playing love style" (Campbell, Foster, C. A., & Finkel, 2002, p. 340) which is a strategy designed for personal gain at the expense of their partner. These actions are often a conscious choice by the INT, who has an awareness of the effect of these behaviors on the PNT (Tortoriello et al., 2017). These behaviors are not likely to improve as time goes on, in fact, the opposite is typically true (Furnham et al., 2013).

PNTs may find that the dramatic shift in the dynamics of the dyad is bewildering and difficult to comprehend (Back et al., 2013; Konrath et al., 2014; Lavner et al., 2016). The outcome of INTs' behavior on PNTs can result in damaged self-views, which literature suggests may include eroded self-esteem, feelings of being off-balance,

confusion, frustration, and declines in happiness (Konrath et al., 2014; Lavner et al., 2016; Määttä et al., 2011; Seidman, 2016). Regardless of the increasingly negative effects of maintaining a relationship with INTs (Furnham et al., 2013; Konrath et al., 2014), some PNTs may commit to staying longer. The existing previous research is minimal as to determining what factors may prompt an individual to remain longer or to leave, however, theories range from such concepts as specific personality characteristics of one or both individuals to behavior shifts created by the specific dynamics in this type of relationship (Back et al., 2013; Keller et al., 2014; Lamkin et al., 2017; Lavner et al., 2016; Wurst et al., 2017).

As Lamkin et al. (2015) state, very little attention has been paid to the partners of individuals with narcissistic traits, and likewise, little information exists about the “interpersonal psychological burden” (Day et al., 2019, p. 2) from the partners’ perspective. Määttä et al. (2011) explain that research into the narcissistic relationship and day-to-day life with INTs is important because it can benefit the people that the INTs have the most influence over, such as the romantic partners. In addition, Foster et al. (2018) suggest that since most of the research knowledge pool comes from the narcissist’s perspective, future research should encompass relational variables that include the partner. They point out that researchers are likely to receive different answers and perspectives from partners than they do from narcissists themselves. Increased knowledge of the unique characteristics of these relationships can assist instructors in training students from psychological fields. It can also help to provide a framework for

helping interventions for those students who may later practice in a clinical setting and for those individuals who already do.

Purpose of Study

The intent of this study was to explore how PNTs describe the engagement, duration, and termination of their relationships with INTs. Any changes in the PNTs' self-views were documented as they described the entire course of the relationship trajectory, as well as attributions made to explain the endurance of the connection. To fill the gap in the current literature, this study was guided by narrative qualitative research methods. Interviews with participants provide the core of the data to develop an understanding of the PNTs themselves, their experiences of their relationships, the longevity, and subsequent terminations.

Research Question

RQ1- Qualitative: What are the experiential narratives of former partners who have been in a long-term relationship with an individual who exhibits narcissistic traits, from meeting to post-termination?

Sub-RQ1- Qualitative: How did former partners of individuals with narcissistic traits view themselves before, within, and after their relationship?

Sub-RQ2- Qualitative: How do former partners who have been in a long-term relationship with an individual who exhibits narcissistic traits make sense of the relationship's longevity?

Theoretical Foundation

Relationships between a romantic dyad require exchanges of social behavior on a regular and intimate level. For this reason, two models of social exchange were employed to provide context for this study, the investment theory of social exchange and the affect theory of social exchange. Expanded detail is provided about these theories in Chapter 2. In essence, Homans (1958) first advanced the concept in academic literature that humans are more likely to continue to participate in social exchange when the perceived rewards are higher than the associated personal costs. Blau (1987) further developed this theory by including the model of alternating reciprocity in which individuals adjust their behavior based on each dyadic exchange.

Human beings measure the costs and benefits associated with relationships, and at first blush, individuals who possess narcissistic traits are often highly skilled at initial social contact. When someone presents as extraverted, attractive, charming, motivated, and successful (Back et al., 2013; Tortoriello et al., 2017; Wurst et al., 2017), the rewards of partnering with that person may seem elevated to the partner. However, as research demonstrates, and as is explained in Chapter 2 in greater detail, the higher costs of pairing with such individuals quickly becomes apparent, and these costs become increasingly weighty over time (Fatfouta et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2016). The transactional nature of social exchange theories (Blau, 1987) lends themselves well to explaining the narcissistic relationship since, at least from the INT point of view, they are seeking such things as vicarious status and extraordinary attention in exchange for their presence in the relationship (Brewer et al., 2018; Campbell, 1999).

Rusbult (1980) applied the social exchange principles in terms of investment, relationship satisfaction, and comparison with alternatives to create the investment theory of social exchange. This theory was advanced to explain why some couples maintain a relationship longer, even in the face of a large imbalance of associated costs. As occurs in the narcissistic relationship, some individuals partner longer with an INT than others, and Rusbult's explanation of other influences that may prompt commitment ties into how PNTs make sense of that longevity. Rusbult's main factors for increased commitment may relate directly to the PNTs' perception of their intrinsic and extrinsic investment in the relationship, the rewards garnered, and the perceived availability (or lack thereof) of alternative mates who could fulfill their needs.

The affect theory of social exchange was advanced by Lawler (2001) and brought the consideration of the emotional realm into the social exchange. At the base of social exchange, positive and negative feelings are created by the rewards and costs of the relationship. The collaborative nature of an emotive exchange ultimately determines the attachment's strength throughout the relationship. INTs are exceptionally skilled at drawing people into relationships initially based on the positive feelings created by their agentic social behaviors (Carlson et al., 2015). However, as the relationship progresses, the PNT generally becomes more exposed to and affected by the increasingly negative behaviors perpetrated by the INT (Hepper et al., 2014; Wurst et al., 2017), and thus the collaboration begins to falter. It is the emotionally cyclical nature of the more extreme positive and negative feelings in narcissistic relationships that is likely highly confusing for the PNT (Ye et al., 2016). A more detailed explanation is included in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study is qualitative, and thematic narrative inquiry was used to address the research question using the models of Chase (2005), Clandinin and Huber (2010), Cortazzi (1993), and Riessman (2008). Primary data were derived through interviews with adult participants who have been formerly romantically involved long-term with an INT. The use of qualitative methodology and narrative inquiry are justified in this study, as explained below. First, the qualitative approach was supported in this project since sparse research has been conducted on the consequences of narcissistic traits on others within the INT's orbit. As research implies, the intimate partner may be suffering within a narcissistic relationship just as much, or more than the individual with narcissistic traits (Back, et al., 2013; Furnham et al., 2013; Keller et al., 2014; Konrath et al., 2014; Määttä et al., 2012). Unfortunately, however, the partners of INTs are typically only mentioned through the lens of research into the narcissist themselves or in conjunction with testing around narcissism. For this reason, qualitative research is more appropriate for exploring the previously untapped knowledge of a narcissistic relationship from the unique perspectives of PNTs.

Second, narrative inquiry was appropriate in this exploration. Its use develops a rich, evocative image of the phenomena at hand through individual lived and told stories (Creswell, 2018) and provides a much more expansive knowledge base. This research can be considered a biographical study, in which specific experiences of participants are recorded, as well as an oral history in which participants were asked to reflect on certain chains of events and situations within their relationships (Plummer, 1983). The specific

narrative approach used is described by Chase (2003), Clandinin and Huber (2010), Cortazzi (1993), and Riessman (2008). These authors present information regarding a sociological view of narrative research, which focuses on specific facets of participants' lives and the interaction contexts of the narrative, as opposed to cognitive processes, narrative structure, or cultural patterning. This allows the researcher to consider the chronology of the relationship stories and to extract common themes that emerge from the telling across stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). There are natural turning points in the story of a relationship that are a good fit with narrative methodology, including the decision to enter the relationship, events that occur within, what leads to the end of the relationship, and the events of the final breakup and aftermath.

Definitions

There may be certain instances in this paper where definitions are required for the sake of clarity and provide further understanding for the meaning of specific usages of terms. These definitions are listed below:

Gaslighting: Psychological manipulation designed to create self-doubt or confusion via attempting to distort another person's perception of reality, usually for the manipulator's personal gain.

Homophily: A term used to describe situations where there is high similarity between subjects or objects. Referring to relationships and personal qualities, when like attracts like.

Individual Exhibiting Narcissistic Traits (INT): This term defines individuals who may not have been diagnosed with NPD but who exhibit a high level of narcissistic traits

(as described by romantic partners) and meeting SN thresholds. This is determined by the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (Carer Version; SB-PNI-CV) incorporated into the screening tool, which has been determined as a valid and reliable measure of SN for informant-based investigations (Day et al., 2019).

Ludus: Translated from Latin and means ‘game’. However, researchers have applied this term regarding the narcissistic relationship to mean that narcissists have a ‘game playing love-style’ in which the INT makes use of strategy or manipulation to obtain what they want from their partners (Campbell, 1999; Lamkin et al., 2015).

Narcissist/Narcissism: These terms are used interchangeably in research and anecdotally for individuals who either meet NPD criteria and those who may meet SN criteria (Jonason et al., 2009; Cai & Luo, 2018). These terms are also often used colloquially for individuals who may exhibit higher levels of perceived narcissistic traits without assessment. For the purposes of this research, these terms only refer to individuals meeting the former criteria.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD): This term is used specifically in relation to individuals who have received a formal diagnosis via qualified psychological assessment for individuals who fit the criteria listed in the DSM-5 (American Psychological Association, 2013).

Narcissistic Relationship: The narcissistic relationship encompasses a dyad wherein one or both partners may be high in narcissistic traits as diagnosed or assessed by the aforementioned methods (Firestone, 2013).

Partners of Individuals Exhibiting Narcissistic Traits (PNT): This term denotes those individuals who have been partnered with a person who has high levels of narcissistic traits, as determined by the informant-based assessment as a screening tool, the SB-PNI-CV. PNTs and their experiences of their narcissistic partnerships are the focus of this examination.

Subclinical Narcissism: Subclinical narcissism (SN) is the term most commonly used by researchers in literature, and interchangeably with ‘narcissism’ and ‘narcissist’. The general usage denotes an individual who may not have been given a formal diagnosis of NPD, however, who meets narcissistic trait criteria based on the usage of an assessment such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) or the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI: a newer assessment which adds a vulnerability component: Foster & Campbell, 2007; Pincus et al., 2009). The NPI and PNI are considered the gold standards for academic determination of narcissism in terms of reliability and validity when compared with NPD diagnostic assessments (Brailovskaia et al., 2019; Gentile et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2011; Pincus, 2013; Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Assumptions

This research investigated participants who partnered with individuals who exhibit high levels of narcissistic traits (subclinical narcissism- based on partner report), on a longer-term basis. Data were obtained via semi structured face-to-face or zoom interviews of partners. There were several assumptions made in creating the structure of this research. First, it was assumed that this phenomenon of partnering with an INT may have some common sets of experiences that were relayed via each individuals’ narrative.

To perform data analysis involving themes, some amount of patterning in data must be present to determine that a phenomenon does indeed exist (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Second, it was assumed that participants were open, honest, and provided a relatively holistic account in the representation of their experiences so as not to bias study outcomes. Third, it was assumed that all participants would have more than a basic grasp of English with the ability to fully understand the interview questions and to relay elements of their stories in descriptive detail. Without this common understanding between interviewee and interviewer, accurate detail and rich description would not be possible. Fourth, it was assumed that participants may have experienced some negative experiences based on partnering with an INT. Research suggests that partners bear the brunt of the more negative characteristics of narcissism when they engage in a relationship with an INT (Fatfouta et al, 2017; Keller et al., 2014), however, this may not always be the case. Further to this, it was assumed that the narcissistic qualities affect the dyad and its progression in a different way than in other relationships. In addition, it was assumed that the ultimate outcomes of these relationships may have a different pattern from other dyads. These assumptions likewise imply that by establishing patterns of common experiences there exists identifiable phenomena. The research around narcissistic relationships delineated in Chapter 2 suggests that there are indeed specific characteristics of narcissistic relationships that are unique to this dyad, and these assumptions rest heavily on the existing literature.

Scope and Delimitations

The focus of this research is to understand the experiences of individuals who had partnered with someone exhibiting higher levels of narcissistic traits and to consider the role that these traits played in the relationship transactions and dissolution. Since NPD is present in just under 10% of the North American population, however prolific INTs may be in the dating world, it is likely that not everyone has had contact with higher levels of narcissistic characteristics within their relationships. The stories of those who individuals who have partnered with INTs are invaluable, however, and until now, had yet to be told in a first-hand, qualitative format. Understanding these experiences and the progression of these long-term relationships in a deeper way, including PNTs' viewpoints of themselves throughout and attributions around the longevity of their relationships, were the primary goals of this research.

In order to be considered for participation in this research, an individual must have had to fulfill the following criteria: (a) be an adult of at least the age of majority (18) and under the age of 65, (b) reside in or around the surrounding areas of a large city in Canada, (c) be able to fluently speak, understand, read, and write English, (d) have spent at least 1 year in a committed relationship with an INT, (e) have been permanently separated from their INT partner for at least 6 months, (f) able to report that their relationship did not involve chronic physical violence, (g) not currently experiencing a crisis, (h) not considered mentally or emotionally disabled, and (i) not part of a vulnerable population in other ways. Potential participants who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study. Any individual with either personal or professional

connections to me were excluded, including family, friends, and clients to avoid any conflicts of interest. An upper limit to the length of time separated from a former INT partner was not included as a delimiter since research demonstrates that memories with strong emotional content remain vivid across the passage of time (Cooper et al., 2019).

An additional delimitation of this research includes the choice to rely solely on participant narratives, as opposed to including data from family, friends, or even the INT themselves. This choice was partially made due to time and financial restrictions, however, since an overarching emphasis of the research is to finally provide a voice to the partners of INTs, it was of utmost importance to allow the lens through which this data emerges to be uncomplicated by other points-of-view.

Two theoretical frameworks were made use of in this study which are each a branch of social exchange theory, the investment theory of social exchange, and the affect theory of social exchange. Social exchange theories relate to the dyadic interactions that can take place in romantic (and other) relationships, with the added distinction of examining the transactional elements inherent in romantic relationships (Blau, 1987; Emerson, 1976; O'Boyle et al., 2012). With the addition of the consideration of the two branches, both the cost-reward balance and the emotive properties of these relationships, there is depth added to the investigation which could account for the events that may lead partners to stay longer in a specific relationship, as well as the personal meaning behind their impressions (Ekeh, 1974; Lawler, 2001; Mikkelsen & Paukey, 2013; Rusbult, 1979; Webster et al., 2015). These theories directly relate to the examination of PNT experience and perception of the relationship, including beliefs and

attributions around staying with their INT partner for as long as they did, and the feelings around their partner, the relationship, and themselves.

However, common theoretical bases involved with research around PNTs that have previously been found in the literature regarding relationships and narcissistic relationships also include the lens and process models of interpersonal judgement (Back et al., 2010) and personality theories (often examining the big five personality factors), including that of homophily, in which like attracts like (Carter et al., 2014; Keller et al., 2014; Lamkin et al., 2015; Rauthmann, 2012; Smith et al., 2014). As well, the theoretical base of subject versus object relationships is used by Määttä et al. (2012) to describe narcissistic relationships. From a subject perspective, partners are treated as autonomous and with their own set of needs, whereas in an object relationship, typical of the narcissistic relationship, the partner has value only as a means to satisfy the needs of the narcissist.

Both the lens and process models and personality theories have been used to examine quantitative data and are thus very applicable to specific elements of the narcissistic relationship. While both theories could be reasonably applied in a qualitative setting, they do narrow the possible focus of the examination. This narrow focus may be somewhat restrictive to a broader narrative framework, as many elements of the story of a relationship may fall well outside of the boundaries of how an individual processes their experience or what personality factors affect this type of relationship. Instead, the research questions delve into the participant's perception of their entire personal reality over that time period to find a place of truth in a wider sense, not limited to a quest for

specificity in detail. In the case of a subject-object relationship, this phenomenon is very applicable in the current research, however, as with the models above, is limited in terms of specific boundaries to a narrative. In the current research, this describes only one possible facet of a participant's experience, and from a more constrained perspective, tends to describe how the INT imposes a worldview or behaviors on the relationship, as opposed to developing a rich description from the PNT's point of view, including details recounting their own agency, for example.

Transferability of the outcomes of this study is partially limited due to the nature of a narrative qualitative study. While there may be common themes that emerge from the data, the findings are not be generalizable to a wider population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The sample size of this research was relatively small, carefully chosen, and focused on contextually based, deeper, and rich individual descriptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Riessman, 2008) which may provide foundational directions for more targeted research in the future. However, Ravitch and Carl (2016) point out that thick contextual description does allow for some comparisons to other contexts, particularly in creating study design, and with certain findings. This format of investigation allows for crucial insights of "depth rather than breadth" (Riessman, 2008, p. 194) regarding multifaceted social constructs through the first-hand interpretations of participants.

Limitations

Many of the limitations of this research rely on the previously mentioned assumptions. The nature of qualitative research depends on the participants to be willing to share their accurate perceptions of events and their experiences in an open way. In

addition, memory can be selective, or stories may be told from a perspective with the intention to persuade (Anderson, 2010; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Riessman, 2008), whether this is with the intention to fit cultural norms or to induce the researcher and reader to sympathize, for example. There is, however, no true way to ensure that accurate perceptions are being related. The hope is that this limitation has been eliminated or mitigated by the use of face-to-face or zoom interviewing, with an emphasis on empathy, lack of judgement, and confidentiality. By building a trusting rapport and safe space, perhaps more room has been created for honesty and openness.

The nature of this research relies on the narratives of the partners of INTs, which means that INT behaviors and motivations have been assessed solely through the lens of the romantic partner. While this assessment is perhaps different from what could be evaluated by an outside and objective source, this is both a limitation and a strength to this research. Assessments were completed regarding INT behavior prior to PNT acceptance in the study so it was the PNT who answers the questions in proxy. While this format of assessment has been supported by previous researchers (See Instrumentation in Ch. 3), the information provided could be colored by PNT experiences of the relationship. However, the INT has primarily held the dominant voice, typically through quantifiable and well-researched source information. The goal of this research was to present the flip side—the PNT point-of-view—to balance to what is already known.

Another possible limitation is based on researcher skill and interpretation. Qualitative narrative work relies on the researcher as a conduit for participant stories, and it is possible that faulty interviewing skills or difficulty in interpretation could skew the

overall threads of the narratives in a way that is not representative of participant experience (Anderson, 2010). To mitigate this possibility, interview questions were vetted by experts involved in the supervision of the research. As well, I drew upon years of experience as a clinical counsellor by using tools such as probing and clarification to elicit as much rich detail as possible. The trail of evidence has been documented in as much detail as possible, with critical evaluations conducted for each piece of data in relation to others, as is suggested by Riessman (2008). In addition, member checking occurred to establish confirmation of meaning.

Due to the specificity of purposive sampling, and constraints around sampling in a geographical area based on available resources and time limitations for the research, it is possible that participants may be of more homogeneous demographics. While every attempt was made to include a diversity of participants, sampling requests were launched to other counsellors in a specific region to facilitate interviews. What this means is that participant experience may not be conflated to general experiences of the phenomenon of partnering with a narcissistic individual, especially beyond these constraints. There is likely a smaller variation in socioeconomic status, race, culture, and language than is more widely possible. While this limitation may not be mitigated per se, it is the focus of this research to be deep and detailed, with great weight placed on the narrative subtleties of human experiences with as little restriction as possible.

To safeguard against potential bias, I conducted continual mindful cognitive reflection in the way information and questions were presented, as well as in examining interpretations of data. This process involved acknowledging bias and assumptions when

consciously identified, examining the effect on thoughts and behaviors, and framing them as separate from the information that is collected. The focus was thus the participants' and their narratives, as opposed to my viewpoints of the subject matter. This strategy was of distinct importance due to my experiences as a clinical counsellor. I entered this research process with some preconceived conceptualizations around the topic of partnering with narcissists due to experiences with clients, as well as in personal life. It was crucial to challenge these notions and reframe these as being experiences which took place in unique moments and may or may not have any bearing on the current research.

Notwithstanding these limitations, it is anticipated that the outcome of this research provides helpful insights into possible aspects of education and training around partnering with a narcissist from a psychological perspective, as well as directions for potential interventions to assist those partners who seek counselling.

Significance of the Study

This research aimed to fill the gap in understanding the experiences of former long-term PNTs both during the relationship, and the subsequent breakup. With more information from participants who had partnered with INTs, it may be possible to develop strategic interventions for individuals who wish to make sense of their narcissistic relationship. This understanding will make it possible to educate the next generation of those in the psychological field in terms of the nuances of this unique form of emotional abuse and possible clinical strategies.

This topic is unique because the partners' experiences of a relationship with an INT is rarely studied except in the context of research around the INT themselves, yet the

existing literature does point to the many detrimental effects that narcissism can have on a relationship and the individuals involved with INTs (Back et al., 2013; Furnham et al., 2013; Lamkin et al., 2017; Lavner et al., 2016). These authors demonstrate that the narcissistic relationship is distinctive in its negative characteristics, and thus may present distinctive challenges in meaning-making and subsequent recovery.

The outcomes of this study provide a depth of information from the partner's perspective, which can help to inform additional research and knowledge around individuals affected by partners' narcissistic traits. From a social change perspective, a basic understanding of the experiences of these relationships can serve to enrich the education potential for new counselors and psychological educators, particularly in the abnormal psychology field. As well as potential counseling interventions could be generated that are more specifically targeted to the unique emotional upheaval that is created by these relationships for PNTs. These could take the form of helping someone who desires to leave this type of relationship or to assist these individuals in recovering from the termination of the relationship, for example. While narcissists themselves may not seek counseling support unless compelled to do so, nor show much improvement in core symptoms because of counseling (Ellison et al., 2013), it is the romantic partner who may benefit the most from a greater understanding of these relationships and directed interventions. This means that there is the possibility of addressing important emotional and mental health needs for a subset of people who may have been formerly overlooked. With a foundation from this exploratory qualitative research into the experience of a

narcissistic relationship, it is possible that this knowledge could be used as the basis for subsequent quantitative research.

Summary

While a great deal of research and information exists around narcissists and how they conduct themselves, there is a dearth of literature regarding the people who narcissistic traits may most negatively affect, such as the romantic partners. However, to understand how individuals experience relationships with INTs, it is important to first establish how these traits may uniquely exhibit themselves within romantic relationships. Narcissists can be seen to have highly developed light and dark sides, based on some extreme or polarized behaviors. These may include a facility with initial social contacts, which then devolve into emotionally abusive behaviors towards individuals who engage more frequently with them. Because the PNT is viewed in the relationship by the INT as an object in service of their needs, PNT needs are often unmet.

The narcissistic relationship had yet to be explored through first-hand accounts by former partners of INTs, and no qualitative studies were found to illuminate this point-of-view. This and the scarcity of literature surrounding viewpoints of relationships involving narcissistic traits from anything other than quantitatively focused investigations of narcissists or the narcissist's lens justified the exploratory nature of this research. The stories of these relationships as narrated by the PNTs provide valuable insight into how longer-term relationships with narcissists begin, endure, and finally end, as well as how PNT self-view may have changed over this period. The findings of this exploration may

be foundational towards psychological and counseling education and helping interventions, as well as future research.

Chapter 2 reviews the current literature regarding the theoretical base of social exchange theories, narcissism, and the narcissistic relationship. Woven throughout, is information gleaned from research on narcissists that addresses how partnering with an INT may affect the PNT and the relationship. There are many parallels between narcissistic trait and subsequent behaviors which are shown to produce unique wellness outcomes for PNTs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Individuals with higher levels of narcissistic traits may function very well in certain realms due to the advantages that these traits provide, however, closer personal relationships are often greatly impaired also as a result of certain of these traits (Fatfouta et al., 2017; Lamkin et al., 2017; Määttä et al., 2012; Wurst et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2016), Current literature is very developed in terms of describing who these individuals are personality-wise and how they operate in the world (Back et al., 2013; Fatfouta et al., 2017; Lavner et al., 2016; Tortoriello et al., 2017), however, it is the people in the INTs' spheres that are most negatively affected by the narcissistic traits, especially the longer they stay in close contact with an INT (Konrath et al., 2014; Lavner et al., 2016; Seidman, 2016; Ye et al., 2016). Because of the personality profile of an INT, there is a unique form of emotional abuse that is perpetrated within an INT-PNT dyad (Keller et al., 2014; Furnham et al., 2013). Unfortunately, academic literature containing information about individuals in intimate relationships with INTs is very limited and has only recently begun to garner attention in popular culture. What research that does exist about these people who are so affected by INT behaviors is generally gathered during the scope of data collection around a study of narcissists themselves. In gleaning this information from study to study, it is possible to piece together an exploratory foundational image of who may partner with narcissists and their experiences with these relationships. However, not only has the existing literature failed to provide a full picture relevant to the PNT and their relationship experiences, it likewise does not illuminate how the reward-cost experiences of the PNT may create an environment of longevity for

some relationships with INTs, but not for others. This study was designed to shed light on how some PNTs experience their relationships and subsequent terminations with INTs, which is a reverse perspective to the current literature around issues of narcissistic traits in relationships.

Content and Search Strategy

The literature search strategy employed was primarily based on peer-reviewed journal articles, with supportive content from some scholarly texts written by known experts in the field of personality disorders. Special attention was directed to the work of the originators of important theoretical bases. The two main sources of literature were databases within the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. Topics under review consisted of information related to the problem statement, research questions, and the theoretical foundation. It was clear from the research that intimate relationships with INTs are highly problematic, and that they cause great distress for partners; however, very little had been done to create more understanding of how and why this occurs, and who is involved. The PNTs' experiential descriptions of the course of the relationship may tie into changing self-views over the duration and explain elements of longevity to the relationship in the face of this unique form of emotional abuse. There are both benefits and costs associated with relationships with INTs, some of which may explain the experiences and longevity of some of these dyads.

There are some specific databases that are relevant to this topic, including PsycINFO, which contains APA and similar organizations' peer-reviewed research and methodology, JSTOR, which has archived social science journals, psycARTICLES,

which is an APA database and is likewise peer-reviewed material, PsycBOOKS, which contains APA approved full-text books, PubMed, which offers journal articles from a medical perspective, PsychiatryOnline, which is useful not just for articles, but also for copies of all of the DSM books, the Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, which contains articles on psychiatry, mental processes, and experimental methods, PsycTESTS, which contains articles on measures, surveys, and assessment tools, as well, and the SocINDEX, which contains articles based in sociological research (University of Waterloo, 2011; Walden University, n.d.). The main areas or fields that were searched within include psychology, social psychology, social science, personality disorders, personality tests, relationship or family, social issues, behavior, and abnormal behavior.

Following the Ogawa and Malen method (Randolph, 2009) of qualitative literature review, as research was gathered, a literature matrix and annotated bibliography were created regarding the content of each article to help with organization. Certain search terms were used that could focus on elucidating answers to the main topics and major themes emerged and were organized into sections to be addressed in the review. In addition, links between themes were identified and applied to a form of narrative arrangement for the order of the presentation of categories and subcategories to form a story. Contrary findings were likewise included.

The main categories included in the review are the Theoretical Foundations, Narcissism, and the Narcissistic Relationship. Key words used in searches in various combinations include, *partners, narcissist, relationships, couples, personality disorders, dark triad, social exchange theory, affect theory of social exchange, investment theory of*

social exchange, emotional abuse, gaslighting, interpersonal relationships, relationship satisfaction, coercive control, narcissistic abuse, psychological manipulation, relationship termination, subclinical narcissism, narcissistic dyad, conflict communication, psychological violence, narcissistic injury, emotional abuse recovery, shifting boundaries, and long-term relationships. Delimiters included peer-reviewed articles and date ranges, as well as the terms *children, childhood, physical abuse.* This work was conducted with the help of staff consultations at Walden residencies and the Walden Librarians.

Theoretical Foundation

Social Exchange Theories

Homans (1958) formalized the concept of social behavior as an exchange into the behavioral psychology realm by arguing that dyadic behavior is reinforced by each member. Every form of behavior that an individual engages in with another may be met with a personal value and a cost associated. Individuals make choices around the behavior that they emit, and around the value and cost associated based on each specific dyadic interaction. Thus, human behavior and interaction are based on a system of psychological rewards (Ekeh, 1974). Homans suggests three propositions of human interaction, that of success, stimulus, and deprivation-satiation. These principles delineate that people are more likely to continue actions that are rewarded, that similar actions will occur as a response to the presence of a stimuli that existed during previous rewards, and the more often a reward is given, the less valuable this reward becomes. Homans gives by example the experiments of Skinner in which pigeons were conditioned into certain

pecking behavior by reinforcement, pointing out, however, that the experimenter likewise adjusted their own behaviors based on the pigeons' behavior, and the interaction cycle develops from there.

Blau (1987) further developed this concept and emphasized that individuals will alter their behavior based on the social process of give-and-take, with the “alternating reciprocity” (p. 85) of the social interaction as a main concern. His two principles relate to the value provided by interactions and the rationality of choosing actions. When something is highly valuable to a person, they are more likely to choose an action that results in the reward most highly valued, coupled with a calculation around the probability of receiving the reward. Blau's description of the theory lends itself well to the transactional nature of the narcissistic relationship, particularly in that an individual can derive both power and status from a social exchange. For example, INTs may seek to enhance their own self-esteem by associating with partners whom they feel augment their carefully curated, status-based image (Campbell, 1999).

While the social exchange process is implied to rely on a dyadic mutually rewarding interaction or exchange (Emerson, 1976), the narcissistic relationship may not continue to provide balance in this way over the long-term. As Emerson describes, resources are the “attributes of the relationship between actors” (p. 348), and as an example, INTs are notorious for seeking attention with little regard for giving in reciprocity, which damages relationships more deeply as time progresses (Fatfouta et al., 2017; Leckelt et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2016).

O'Boyle et al. (2012) term the INT's participation in relationships to be a "violation" (p. 559) of the fair-exchange principles of the social exchange theory. Specifically, INTs value relationship costs and rewards differently, they do not feel obligations towards reciprocity, and do not endorse deeper emotional responsibilities or desires with others. INTs simply accommodate their partners much less during social transactions (Campbell, 1999). Because of their belief in their own superiority, the usual binding influences of the social exchange does not occur. While INTs excel in "impression management" (O'Boyle et al., 2012, p. 560), a lack of long-term relational skills are a detriment.

Investment Theory of Social Exchange

The investment theory is a model of social exchange developed by Rusbult (1980) which examines the concept that attraction to one's partner and relationship satisfaction is based on the outcome value, defined as rewards and costs, and are compared with the partner's expectations. As well, commitment is based on the outcome value and is a product of the quality of available alternatives and magnitude of investment in the relationship. INTs have a higher propensity to conduct infidelities, and research suggests that not only will rates of commitment lower significantly for INTs when the quality of alternative mates are higher, but levels of relationship satisfaction likewise do so as well (Brewer, Hunt, James, & Abell, 2015; Fincham & May, 2017; Foster & Twenge, 2011; Smith et al., 2014; Wurst, 2017; Ye et al., 2016). In support of this concept, Mikkelson and Pauley (2013) found that people, such as INTs, who tend to actively desire and search for the best mating alternatives (maximizing, as opposed to being satisfied with a threshold of

acceptable quality) are less satisfied with their relationships, have less investment and commitment, and that this is positively correlated to the quality of alternatives.

From a sociosexuality perspective, individuals with unrestricted sexuality orientations likewise had lower levels of relationship investment and commitment unrelated to the length of the relationship (Webster et al., 2015). Unrestricted sexual orientations describe INTs in the sense that they are more comfortable than most people with engaging in casual sex, having sex outside of committed relationships, and have little desire for emotional intimacy during sexual engagement (Foster et al., 2006; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012).

Rusbult also elaborates that investment into relationship resources increases commitment, and increased rewards are positively related to relationship satisfaction, while variation in costs was not significant, which may explain why some PNTs choose to stay longer with INTs. PNTs' level of investment or perceived lack of alternatives due to preexisting or relationship-created beliefs could prevent earlier departure. INTs may not perceive that they have the same level of investment, particularly emotionally, as their partners in the relationship.

Affect Theory of Social Exchange

Lawler's (2001) affect theory of social exchange considers the addition of emotion to the social exchange. Emotions involved in social interactions serve to create weaker or stronger ties within relationships. This exchange of emotional content creates rewards and costs to the people involved in the exchange based on involuntary individual positive and negative feelings (Lawler, 2018). This exchange is described as

collaborative and creates either stronger or weaker attachments based on the variation in intensity and form of the interaction. For example, successful interactions result in emotional “highs” (Lawler, 2001, p. 322) and vice versa.

To illustrate this principle with the INT-PNT relationship, INTs are generally very socially popular and attract mates easily initially based on their agentic behaviors that promote positive reactions (charisma, extravertedness etc.) (Carlson & Lawless DesJardins. 2015; Hepper et al., 2014). This is the behavior that may draw a PNT rapidly into the relationship before the effects of the more negative feelings emerge, or the emotional “costs” of being with an INT. INTs will cyclically return to this agentic behavior in relationships because of the positive reactions received (ie: reinforcement of the associated behaviors), however, as the relationship continues, PNTs will become privy to more negative elements of the INTs’ personalities (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). Strelan (2007) illustrates a specific negative tendency that can be part of the emotional reward and cost interaction. People who experience more guilt tend to be more concerned with their partner’s wellbeing, however, since INTs generally experience very little guilt over their hurtful behavior, that form of emotional responsiveness is not generated towards their partners. In fact, INTs actually tend to be more kind to themselves afterwards, rather than their wounded partners. Sedikides et al. (2002) further explain this phenomenon thusly, “narcissists engage in implicit or explicit cost-benefit analysis. Narcissists calculate the benefits of maintaining psychological stability and the cost of alienating others, and the self-favoring side wins out” (p. 118). As with any social exchange, it is a transactional view of human interaction that can explain commitment, or

lack thereof, to a relationship (Lawler, 2001, 2018). The emotions that a PNT or INT may take away based on their social transactions predict the feelings that they have around their dyad in terms of states such as relationship satisfaction.

Literature Review of Key Concepts

Narcissism

To understand the characteristics of the INT-PNT dynamic as a foundation for investigating PNT experiences within the relationship, the nature of narcissism must also be explored.

Nature of Narcissism

The central characteristics of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) are grandiosity, elevated requirements for admiration, and a lack of empathy, according to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2013). These individuals inflate their appraisal of their accomplishments and will relay overestimated value judgments about their efforts and worth to others around them (Rauthmann, 2011). Often this self-perception appears to manifest in extroverted qualities such as charisma, leadership, attractiveness, self-esteem, and confidence, agentic qualities which can be construed as socially effective dimensions (Ahmadian et al., 2017; Back et al., 2013). However, in the longer term, narcissists' self-centered behavior and antagonistic traits can create interpersonal difficulties that alienate the people around them (Back et al., 2010; Grijalva et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2017). Some examples of this behavior include frequent instances of lying, cheating, and manipulation (Carraro et al., 2018). Narcissism is diagnosed in up to just over 6% of the population, with 50%-75% of diagnosed

individuals being male (APA, 2013). In a widely referenced study, Stinson et al. (2008) confirmed this overall lifetime prevalence rate and determined that Narcissistic Personality Disorder is present in 7.7% of males, and 4.8% of females, and is significantly more present in separated or divorced adults, as well as those who never married.

There is recent research that suggests that the APA definition of NPD is potentially ignoring a subset of narcissism which is defined as a vulnerable subtype, or that an individual with NPD will fluctuate between two states of being, the grandiose and vulnerable subtypes (Crowe et al., 2018; Gore & Widiger, 2016; Pincus et al., 2014). While many of the characteristics of the two subsets are generally consistent, the vulnerable subtype is distinguished from the grandiose subtype by feelings of inferiority and shame (neuroticism), that can manifest as a lack of grandiosity or extraversion (Gore & Widiger, 2016; Miller et al., 2017). A commonly associated factor with both subtypes is an extreme vulnerability to perceived slights and setbacks (Di Pierro et al, 2017; Gore & Widiger, 2016; Luchner et al., 2011). Individuals may respond to these supposed or imagined attacks with “disdain, rage, or defiant counterattack” (APA, 2013, p. 671).

Grandiosity. Individuals with NPD believe themselves to be superior to others, regardless of their realistic achievements (APA, 2013; Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017). These individuals expect praise commensurate with their highly magnified self-views and may be surprised or angry when this admiration is not forthcoming (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017; Di Pierro et al., 2017). To others, especially with longer-term contact (Ahmadian et al., 2017), they can appear “boastful and pretentious” (APA, 2013, p. 670).

Those with NPD desire for everyone to recognize their greatness, and therefore, are often skilled at self-promotion. Paired with this behavior, comes the derogation of other individuals' abilities and contributions (APA, 2016; Di Pierro et al., 2017), which may also exhibit in the form of highly competitive behavior (Luchner et al., 2011).

Fantasies of Unlimited Success and Power. Human beings may fantasize about such things as wealth, beauty, ideal love, or success, however, an individual with NPD may become preoccupied with these types of fantasies, believing themselves to be worthy of privilege and accolades, even in the absence of concrete goals to achieve such results (APA, 2013; Kanske et al., 2017). Individuals with NPD may not fully recognize that the fantasy does not reflect their reality. In addition, these individuals will compare themselves favorably to others who have already achieved status and fame (APA, 2013; Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017; Di Pierro et al., 2017).

Belief in Special Nature. Because NPD individuals have a belief that they are special and superior, often without merit, they expect that those with whom they associate with are superior and of high status themselves (APA, 2013). These individuals believe that they can only be understood by others who possess unique talents or who have a popular profile. This association manifests in increased self-esteem, since these individuals possess qualities to which the NPD individual believes themselves to exhibit, and thus bask in reflected glory (APA, 2013). For example, the APA suggests that someone with NPD will require association with the "best" (p. 670) person or institution (doctor, hairdresser, exclusive clubs etc...). Similarly to the negative effects of grandiose behavior and due to the belief in their superiority, individuals with NPD may begin to

actively and increasingly devalue those who do not live up to their manufactured and unrealistic ideals (Ahmadian et al., 2017; APA, 2013; Di Pierro, et al., 2017). In essence, narcissists will put those they believe to be of high status on a metaphorical pedestal but will subsequently knock those people down from it once that person inevitably presents as multi-dimensional, with flaws that do not match the unrealistic ideal. Di Pierro et al. suggest that when a partner, for example, is no longer able to provide a feeling of status or prominence for the NPD individual within the relationship, that the NPD person may become increasingly detached.

Requires Excessive Admiration. The APA (2013) suggests that contrary to outward appearances, those with NPD have fragile self-esteem, and thus need continual admiration from others. Kernberg (1975) deemed this ongoing quest for positive attention to be filling the “narcissistic supply” (p. 17). External acclaim serves to validate and reinforce their self-image, which may falter upon a lack of “supply”. This means that narcissists are often drawn to situations where they might have the opportunity for public acclaim (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017). In addition, the individual with NPD will experience high levels of distress upon critique (often placing blame for failures on external factors), and high levels of pride in response to successes, all of which may result in excessive reactions either way. These authors describe behaviors in which the individual with NPD will feel that their self-image has been threatened and will respond with anger, aggression, personal attacks, and scapegoating, for instance. For these reasons, narcissists are very highly sensitive to personal rejection (Brewer et al., 2018).

Entitled. Individuals with NPD will often endorse and act upon unrealistic expectations of special treatment that aligns with a belief that they are superior and thus entitled to be catered to (APA, 2013; Cai & Luo, 2018). This may result in anticipation that others should be in service to the NPD individual's interests. If NPD individuals' needs are not made a priority, they may demand extra credit or resources they feel are due to them. As the APA states, the NPD individual may become "puzzled or furious" when others do not "defer" (p. 670) to their priorities. Aggression may be the resultant behavior in service of the NPD individual obtaining what it is that they feel they are entitled to that no one else deserves (Miller et al., 2017).

Exploitative. When a sense of entitlement is combined with a lack of "sensitivity" (APA, 2013, p. 670) to others' needs, an individual with NPD may purposefully or accidentally engage in the exploitation of others (Cai & Luo, 2018). Because the NPD individual feels entitled to special treatment and better resources, they will ignore the cost to the people around them to attain what they feel they deserve. Campbell et al.(2004) point out that the sense of entitlement that a narcissist feels is not based on a concept of realistic rewards for efforts made, and in fact, that this sense of entitlement leads to increased selfishness in personal relationships, for example. The APA suggests that the trait of entitlement results in developing relationships purposefully, in that the other person serves to either provide the enhanced resources that the NPD individual feels they need or alternatively serves to enhance the NPD individual's self-view. However, narcissists will very quickly discard any individual who no longer serves a purpose or advantage for them (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017)

Lacks Empathy. Individuals with NPD are often shown to have a lack of empathy when compared with levels that are consistent among the general population (APA, 2013; Baskin-Sommers et al., 2014; Di Pierro et al., 2017). Hepper et al. (2014) and Baskin-Sommers et al. suggest that the lack of emotional empathy may be the strongest defining characteristic of a narcissist. The DSM-5 defines the lack of empathy as an “impaired ability to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; excessively attuned to reactions of others, but only if perceived as relevant to the self; over or under-estimate of own effect on others” (APA, 2013, p. 767).

The narcissist views others’ feelings and experiences through a lens considering mainly the effect on themselves, dismissing that which does not concern them. In this form, narcissists are capable of empathy, but may lack the motivation to engage in empathy in situations where this feeling would come more naturally to others (Hepper et al., 2014). For example, this may mean that a narcissist will monopolize conversations and elaborate in great detail at the expense of their conversation partners (APA, 2013). If another individual were to discuss their own problems, they may be dismissed with contempt or impatience. For these reasons, the DSM-5 states that persons engaging in relationships with a narcissist may find them to be emotionally cold and lacking in the ability to reciprocate emotionally. In an example provided, an individual may brag to a former lover that they are “now in the relationship of a lifetime” (APA, 2013, p. 671). Baskin-Sommers et al. (2014), Di Pierro et al. (2017), and Hepper et al. (2014) further identified that while narcissists may fully understand cognitive empathy and can identify affect states in others, they lack knowledge or ability in the emotional empathy realm. In

other words, they have little desire to experience emotional involvement with others as this may detract from their own self-experience. However, if there is of personal benefit to doing so, these individuals can appropriately demonstrate empathetic behaviors.

Envy of Others. Individuals with NPD are often envious of the success and possessions of others, believing themselves to be entitled to such things, while others are not (APA, 2013). Particularly, if other people are receiving accolades or attention, the narcissist will attempt to devalue those individuals' privileges or accomplishments. Alternatively, they may also unrealistically feel that others are envious of them. Narcissists will be quick to accept accolades for successes to the detriment of others' contributions but will just as rapidly blame others if things go wrong (Hepper et al., 2014). In fact, Back, et al. (2013) suggest that narcissists carry a strong element of rivalry in personal relationships and that this results in low forgiveness and revenge-orientated behaviors as a function of self-protective measures.

Arrogance. The APA (2013) and Di Pierro et al. (2017) discuss that individuals with NPD may be openly disdainful or patronizing to those that they consider beneath them or in response to perceived slights. Narcissists may be extraordinarily sensitive to slights due to greater ego fragility or external self-esteem demands, and therefore, highly reactive to others, especially regarding people who may be of perceived lower status than themselves (Back, et al., 2013; Bosson et al., 2008; Brewer et al., 2018). In an example given by the DSM-5, a narcissist may complain about a "clumsy waiter" (APA, 2013, p. 671) by calling them rude or stupid. The callous treatment of others, especially when the

narcissist can gain nothing from that specific individual, is a common feature (Jones & Paulhus, 2011).

Subclinical Narcissism

Subclinical narcissism, as the term is used in literature refers to normal (Jonason et al., 2009; Cai & Luo, 2018) or “trait” narcissism, and is similar in nature to Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) (Foster & Campbell, 2007, p. 1330). However, a key difference is that from a clinical standpoint, the standard of a full clinical assessment may not have been met for individuals classified with subclinical narcissism (Bergman et al., 2011). Emmons (1987) was among the first to propose that narcissism currently existed as a theoretical diagnosis with little empirical support, and that the characteristics of narcissism exist not just within a pathological group, but with varying degrees within the general population. His subsequent research did indeed support findings such as that the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (absent from greater assessment) was indeed a valid measure for determining narcissistic traits amongst a nonclinical population, and that specific “factors” (p. 11) or traits correlated to the DSM-III categories for NPD (APA, 1980), particularly convincingly for the subscale of exploitativeness/entitlement. The former idea is also supported by subsequent researchers to more recent versions of the DSM, such as Pinkus and Lukowitsky (2010). Likewise, the Pathological Narcissism Inventory, a newer inventory that addresses the vulnerable subtype as well, shows strong association to both the DSM-5 criteria for NPD, as well as to expert assessment (Fossati et al., 2017).

In essence, research regarding narcissism is generally based around the subclinical categorization and reflects the differences in the clinical and social psychology viewpoint of the construct. As Foster and Campbell (2007), Foster and Twenge (2011), and Sedikides et al. (2002) point out, narcissistic traits can be considered to lie on a personality continuum, rather than belonging to a separate category unto itself. Foster and Campbell state that there exists no point along the narcissism continuum where one “shifts from normal to narcissist” (p. 1322). Certainly, their research, and that of many others, supports this point of view (Bergman et al., 2011; Brummelman et al., 2015; Hepper et al., 2014; Jones & Paulhus, 2011b; Pinkus & Lukowitsky, 2010). What this means, is that some individuals will exhibit a higher level of narcissistic traits than others, and as Emmons affirms, these individuals will have increasingly higher difficulty with interpersonal relationships as their traits exhibit themselves more frequently.

Subclinical narcissism could be considered a “lesser” version of NPD in terms of the severity of traits (Bergman et al., 2011, p. 706), however, commensurate with NPD, subclinical narcissists (SN) subscribe to the grandiose, believe that they are special and entitled, and that they owe nothing to others in reciprocity. An individual who is narcissistic in personality, but who may not be disordered could also be viewed as having valuable social traits, such as high agency, charm, and extraversion, which may be attractive to others, especially initially. Foster and Twenge (2011) describe SNs as individuals who are outgoing and mean, but that this personality combination is likely not inherently troubling for the narcissists themselves. Paulhaus (2001) depicts the phenomena by pronouncing that SNs are “disagreeable extraverts” (p. 229), whereas, the

NPD diagnosis often occurs in a criminal setting, possibly due to the likelihood that noncriminally involved narcissists believe that there is nothing wrong with them (fault is external) and are otherwise not compelled to treatment or assessment.

The disagreeable nature of subclinical narcissism includes a grossly exaggerated self-view not commensurate with actual achievement, and yet is a fragile version of self-esteem. There is strong evidence that SNs have “discrepant high self-esteem” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 235), the combination of high explicit and low implicit self-esteem. The SN will be constantly striving for external sources of validation to “enhance and protect the self” (Hepper et al., 2014, p. 1080). This may include behaviors such as continually seeking attention, wanting to associate with those of high status, and subscribing to a self-serving bias (taking credit for successes, but blaming others for failures), similarly to NPD individuals. Individuals higher in narcissistic traits will react with aggression when their self-view is challenged (Pinkus & Lukowitsky, 2010). They may perceive slights where there are none and react to this or valid criticism with undue hostility.

As mentioned above, SNs are very agentic and, therefore, focused on getting ahead, but they have very little concern whether it is at the expense of others. It is perhaps the lack of empathy that an SN has for others which is the hallmark of their interpersonal difficulties (Hepper et al., 2014). Having a lack of empathy for others does not bode well for long-term relationships especially. The skill of empathy has been powerfully tied to the establishment and maintenance of relationships, and the quality of these relationships (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2014; Di Pierro et al., 2017; Villadangos et al., 2016). Lacking this ability, relationships will suffer for the SN and whoever may be

their friend, intimate, or family. This is particularly true when combined with manipulative and exploitative behaviors, common to SNs (Pinkus & Lukowitsky, 2010).

For the purposes of this research, the term ‘narcissism’ or narcissist refers to subclinical narcissism as is commonly done in the reporting of research results, and the use of the term INT likewise refers to individuals who present with behaviors that are more prevalent than average on the subclinical narcissistic continuum.

Partners of Narcissists

The research regarding partners of INTs is sparse. Until recently, information about partners was rarely investigated at all (Lamkin et al., 2015). The literature which does contain information regarding the partners (or other relations) of a narcissist, identifies problematic behavior often through the lens of research about the narcissist themselves. However, it is possible to glean some information about who might be partnered with narcissists, particularly from relationship-based studies.

One main theory that has been advanced in the past decade around who might partner with a narcissist is the concept of homophily, that like attracts like within intimate relationships or friendships (Lamkin et al., 2015; Lavner et al., 2016). In quantitative studies looking at heterosexual married couples, both Lamkin et al. and Lavner et al. discovered that there is slight support for this concept in terms of empirical data, however, this theory was only shown to be significant for individuals who endorsed the grandiose trait of narcissism. These individuals tended to be more likely to have partners with grandiose traits, agentic, extraverted personalities, and overall narcissism. Both studies uncovered gender differences, such as husbands’ exploitativeness negatively

associated with wives' conscientiousness. No other narcissistic dimensions suggested correlation supporting partner homophily in narcissistic traits. In addition, both studies found that female narcissism is related to a steeper decline in relationship satisfaction. These effects, however, were not studied in terms of how likely a dual-narcissistic relationship could be maintained long-term as compared with the duration of a dyad with only one individual higher in narcissistic traits.

Research seems to suggest that relationships with a dual-narcissistic dyad will tend to exhaust faster since both parties would be interested in having the spotlight on themselves, but not sharing it, be interested in having low emotional investment, and would, therefore, report greater decreased relationship satisfaction (Foster & Twenge, 2011; Lamkin et al., 2015; Lavner et al., 2016; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002). Almost two decades ago, Sedikides et al. advanced the idea that perhaps dual-narcissistic dyads fail quickly because neither person would be able to fulfill the amplified admiration and attention needs of the other. Instead, for a relationship with a narcissistic individual to succeed more long-term, perhaps chances of success are increased when the partner exhibits certain opposite characteristics.

In support of this concept, Adams et al. (2015) showed evidence for "narcissistic hypocrisy", in which individuals higher in narcissistic traits claim to appreciate narcissistic traits in others, yet when confronted by the actual narcissistic behaviors, the higher the level of narcissistic traits a person has, the less tolerance they have for these behaviors. These authors speculate that this is potentially due to protection of the fragile self-esteem, or the requirement for external validation. It is a defense of their identity by

the protection of those maladaptive traits seen in the self, but that the ensuing behavior associated with these traits proves irritating in reality. Confirming the notion that the homophily theory may not be a complete explanation for long-term relationships with an INT, Sleep et al. (2017), established that INTs do indeed gravitate towards some homophilic qualities in others, but that many of these particular characteristics could be considered the positive traits of narcissism, as opposed to the maladaptive ones. Overall, those with higher levels of narcissistic traits did report that they were slightly more tolerant of the maladaptive traits in partners than people lower in narcissistic traits, however, this study was based on abstract trait concepts as opposed to concrete behaviors, contrary to the method of Adams et al. and Sleep et al. did conclude that INTs may be willing to “settle” (p. 315) for more homophilic partners, but that this would not be their ideal partner, perhaps indicating less chance of long-term success of a dual-narcissistic dyad.

Some of the more adaptive qualities associated with narcissism include agentic and extraverted characteristics such as independence, positivity, self-confidence, and ambition (Doneva, 2014; Foster & Twenge, 2011). In a seminal study examining a model of narcissism and romantic attraction, Campbell (1999) showed that INTs are concerned with association with those individuals who can enhance their self-concept. This may include dating someone who could be viewed as having high value, for example, a famous movie star who imbues the aforementioned qualities (Campbell, 1999). Seidman (2016) confirms Campbell’s research and states that INTs don’t just value agency and extraversion in partners, but that they are also happier in relationships with individuals

with these qualities. In other words, these, and other characteristics that PNTs possess may help to promote longer lived relationships with INTs.

INTs seek relationships that will elevate their own status through affiliation (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2018). It is well established in research that INTs are very focused on partners that meet extrinsic ideals, for example, higher social status, popularity (close relationships), attractive, intelligent, sexual, successful, and powerful (Campbell et al., 2002; Doneva, 2014; Lamkin et al., 2015; Seidman, 2016), or “trophy” qualities (Foster & Twenge, 2011, p. 386; Seidman, 2016, p. 1020). The importance of these qualities to an INT rests on the strategy of self-enhancement. By having a partner with outward manifestations of the qualities they admire most and believe themselves to embody, INTs can present carefully curated images to the world, via reflection through their impressive partners. As Lamkin et al. (2015) state, INTs use their romantic relationships as a method to preserve the feeling that they are superior, entitled to special treatment, and to garner social influence.

Campbell (1999) first showed evidence that the intrinsic qualities relating to emotional intimacy and caring is less important to the INT than the extrinsic ones. This concept was later supported by additional research (Doneva, 2014; Foster & Twenge, 2011; Lamkin et al., 2015; Seidman, 2016), however, in deeper investigations of this substantiation, some contrary data came to light similar to the “narcissistic hypocrisy” regarding maladaptive behaviors in partners, as demonstrated by Adams, Hart, and Burton (2015). INTs may believe that their ideal partner exemplifies a high extrinsic value and ignore or profess dislike for the intrinsic values of emotional intimacy and

caring, however, later research has shown that even narcissistic relationships depend on warmth, intimacy, and caring for success, although not to the same degree as people with lower levels of trait narcissism (Lamkin et al., 2015; Seidman, 2016).

In addition, in a quantitative, empirical study, Seidman was able to show that INTs require both high levels of extrinsic qualities and at least moderate levels intrinsic ones in a partner to report relationship satisfaction and wellbeing, whereas for those lower in narcissistic traits, extrinsic qualities were much less important. Seidman details some of the characteristics that narcissists may look for when choosing a partner and why they may begin to devalue their partner because of these traits later in the relationship. This research discusses the type of romantic partner that narcissists are attracted to, based on their ideal perspectives, as well as measuring these outcomes against a personal evaluation as to whether the narcissists' perception of their actual partners met their ideal. Seidman found that narcissists endorsed a preference for extrinsic ideals such as attractiveness and success, as opposed to intrinsic ones like warmth and intimacy. However, narcissists valued intrinsic standards highly as well, so long as these benchmarks did not interfere with the extrinsic standards. On the other hand, participants overall (including the narcissists) reported more satisfaction with relationships that had higher levels of intrinsic ideals. This effect was moderated by the increased existence of the dimensions of exploitativeness and grandiose exhibitionism.

The results of this research are particularly illuminating in terms of insight into the type of partner that a narcissist may choose, versus the type of partner that a narcissist may be able to sustain a longer-term relationship with. This suggests that there may be

some dissonance in terms of what narcissists believe to be their ideal partners as opposed to who these ideal people may actually be. Seidman (2016) discusses the findings that narcissists feel that partners are falling short of their extrinsic ideals, but not their intrinsic ones, which could explain why narcissists may devalue their partners, especially the longer the relationship continues. Of special note, Seidman has used different personality characteristic criteria than has been used in past research examining partner traits and has found a number of consistencies in these traits that correlate to relationship satisfaction, contrary to other research (Lavner et al., 2016)

In fact, this what this data revealed, is that even INTs prefer communal partners in reality, providing this is “not at the expense of extrinsic traits” (Seidman, 2016, p. 1027). Since Foster and Twenge demonstrated that INTs are, in fact, more committed to their partners when relationship satisfaction is high (likely due to their partners’ communal traits), it appears that relationships with INTs that have a greater chance of success when the PNT exhibits both the extrinsic qualities that INTs profess to require and the intrinsic qualities that they are unaware that they need.

As Campbell, (1999) states, INTs have certain goals when it comes to their interactions with others. Aside from displaying status through the association with their partners’ extrinsic qualities, INT’s also have a need for external fulfillment of esteem or narcissistic supply. Admiration and praise from others serve to boost the INT’s narcissistic supply (Foster & Twenge, 2011). However, what is of note, is that the admiring other cannot be considered an inconsequential person to the INT, otherwise attraction will not occur (Campbell, 1999). Doneva (2014) provides evidence that one of

the ways INTs maintain their high self-perception is by engaging in relationships with individuals who are willing to become an “admiring target” (p. 53) in service of the INT’s ego. However, it is clear from the literature that these individuals must be of high status, according to the INT, for their opinions to matter. As well, Lombris and Morf, (2016) discovered that partner valuation is imperative to the continued maintenance of a relationship with an INT. Not only is it likely, therefore, that INTs seek partners who are willing to accommodate the various needs surrounding being able to provide fodder for their self-absorption, it is possible that this is also the fuel which allows the relationship to continue long-term (Lavner et al., 2016; Seidman, 2016). Partners would have to imbue a certain amount of continued agreeableness and flexibility to satisfy narcissistic esteem needs or ‘narcissistic supply’ (Kernberg, 1975) for the INT long-term. It is perhaps these qualities of agreeableness, admiration, flexibility, and caring that allows some PNTs to tolerate staying longer in a relationship where their partners exhibit so many maladaptive traits. In addition, since there is a link from communal characteristics (warmth, kindness, and support) to satisfaction and longer-term relationship success, even though an INT may not actively choose this in a partner (and in fact report disdain for these qualities), it is possible that those PNTs who imbue these characteristics are better able to foster an environment that extends the life of the relationship with INTs (Wurst et al., 2017).

The research that exists concerning PNT-INT dyads tends to focus on the INT perspective. There were few clues as to why a PNT might choose an INT partnership

long-term. This supports the need for deeper investigation into the PNT point of view and how they might make sense of the longevity of the relationship.

The Narcissistic Relationship

“Narcissism has been consistently associated with negative consequences for romantic partners” (Lamkin et al., 2016, p. 224).

How Narcissistic Traits Exhibit in the Relationship

The Positive or the Light Side. Narcissistic individuals are often very socially skilled and adept at forming relationships quickly. The term “bright side and dark side” of personality was coined by Judge & LePine (2007) for organizational use, and Back et al. (2013) introduced this concept in relation to the narcissistic personality in psychology. It is the “bright side” of narcissism that allows people having higher levels of these traits to draw others in based on their initial shine. As Back et al. state, it is that their “charisma and self-assuredness can give them tremendous energy that fascinates others” (p. 1013). Wurst et al. (2016) found that these individuals have high appeal to prospective mates. Narcissism is strongly related to popularity, and success in dating, however, in the short term. In fact, compared with nonnarcissistic dyads, those individuals in relationships involving INTs report less romantic dysfunction in the short-term (Ye et al. 2016).

Some of the qualities that an INT possesses that may aid in establishing relationships center around their positive extravertedness and agentic nature. INTs often present as highly sociable, confident, charming, attractive, popular, funny, intelligent, adventurous, enthusiastic, and motivated to get ahead (Back et al., 2013; Carlson & DesJardins, 2015; Foster & Brunell, 2018; Hepper et al., 2014; Rauthmann & Kolar,

2012b; Smith et al., 2014; Tortoriello et al., 2017; Wurst et al., 2016; Ye et al., 2016). In addition, individuals higher in narcissistic qualities tend to carefully curate their external physical image with impressive clothing, and attention to physical fitness and appearance, which leads people to consider them as more attractive than others (Foster & Brunell, 2018).

INTs do have insight into the magnetism of their more positive qualities (however, they will overestimate these areas), and also an understanding that they diminish in popularity over time (Carlson & DesJardins, 2015). It is these initial qualities that quickly draw in romantic partners with ease, and are leveraged as an apparent dating strategy, especially in forming the relationship. The romantic partner may be presented with an individual who seems like the perfect partner, who is successful in life, and who is willing to sweep them off their feet and to engage in grand gestures of love. Back et al. term this concept ‘love bombing’, a behavior that ensures mate acquisition. Interestingly, Smith et al. report that INTs’ attractiveness and sexual appeal are associated with greater partner commitment and satisfaction. Since INTs are so skilled at self-promotion, it can take some time before their more maladaptive traits become apparent to their partner.

The Negative or the Dark Side.

Lack of Empathy and Support. A lack of empathy is one of the hallmark traits of INTs (Horan et al., 2015; Wright & Furnham, 2014; Ye et al., 2016). As Campbell (1999) states:

Relationships are good for narcissists because they can provide positive attention and sexual satisfaction, but they are bad in that they demand emotional intimacy

and restrict attention and sexual satisfaction from other partners. The ideal solution for a narcissist is to find a way to receive the benefits of a relationship without having to endure the costs (p. 342).

Conveniently, the partner's feelings do not matter to the INT in terms of how the relationship is conducted. Because the INT is so focused on their own needs, it is unlikely for them to spend much time considering the needs of their partner. This results in an insensitivity to partners' concerns (Määttä et al., 2012).

Baskin-Sommers et al. (2014) and Hepper et al. (2014) point out that there are two types of empathy, emotional and cognitive. Emotional empathy consists of the ability to vicariously experience another individual's affective experience and to respond in kind. Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, is the ability to recognize and comprehend the meaning behind someone else's emotional state, to take another individual's perspective. These authors emphasize how critical empathy is for positive ongoing relational interactions and responsiveness to others. INTs have deficits in both areas of empathy, however, particularly so in the emotional empathy realm. Baskin-Sommers et al. state that the root cause of difficulties expressing empathetic responses rests in a lack of motivation to do so. INTs can often recognize other's emotive states, but not only do they not want to appear vulnerable, they may not have the ability to connect to the appropriate responses. The consequences for partners due to these deficits is that relationship bonds are much weaker, interpersonal engagements are more difficult, and there is less prosocial behavior in reciprocation (Hepper et al., 2014; Sedikides et al., 2002). The callous treatment of romantic partners would not be unusual behavior for an

INT (Foster & Brunell, 2018; Jones & Palhus, 2011b; Miller et al. 2010). The disinterest or difficulty in accommodating partner needs, showing concern, or self-sacrificing has repercussions to the relationship and the PNT. As Miller et al. state, PNT's relationships with INTs "will lack the mutuality of status, caring, and respect that characterizes functional adult relationships" (p. 116).

However, as Hepper et al. (2014) assert, INTs can demonstrate empathy when it serves their personal goals to do so, perhaps because of partial abilities in the cognitive empathy realm. In fact, Konrath et al. (2014) discovered that INTs have no deficits in recognizing the emotions of other based on facial expressions, and are better at doing so with some emotions, especially with anger. They stress that oftentimes, the INT's personal goals related to their emotional recognition abilities rests around exploiting perceived weakness, including emotional vulnerabilities of partners. Interestingly, Wurst et al. (2017) emphasize that INTs specifically exhibit much less empathy during long-term relationships, perhaps because the performance of empathy helps in initial stages of a relationship in terms of the goal of partner acquisition.

Because INTs are hypersensitive to critique (Hepper et al., 2014), it would be difficult for a partner to bring forward ideas for positive change in the relationship to promote more support, care, and warmth. As these authors suggest, doing so may risk a hostile reaction and because of this, emotional safety for the PNT is eroded.

Poor Quality Interpersonal Relationship. When one half of a dyad is willing to give very little in the way of empathy and support, the relationship suffers greatly. In general, narcissistic behaviors have been shown to have debilitating effects on

interpersonal relationship, and this affects the people in closets orbit to the INT the most (Bosson et al., 2008; Campbell, 1999; Campbell et al., 2006; Fatfouta et al., 2017; Keller et al., 2014). Correspondingly, Hepper et al. (2014) and Wurst et al. (2017) have shown that impairment to interpersonal relationships is greater for long-term partners. As Foster and Campbell (2005) state, “in the domain of interpersonal relationships, narcissism is almost exclusively a negative for the partner” (p. 550). The impairments in interpersonal closeness based on behaviors related to narcissistic traits cause pain and suffering for the romantic partner (Lamkin et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2007). In fact, when compared with other personality disorders, the suffering of PNTs tends to be much greater, leading Miller et al. to conclude that narcissistic traits are particularly challenging to endure when having to experience them regularly.

One element that greatly damages a close relationship with INTs is that they do not desire emotional closeness with their partners, instead valuing more extrinsic and agentic qualities. In other words, they do not wish to have emotionally close, caring, and warm relationships, meaning that the possibility of true intimacy is compromised (Campbell et al., 2002; Konrath et al., 2014, Määttä et al., 2012; Wurst et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2016). For partners who might crave this kind of intimacy, they would be left unsatisfied, desiring behaviors that their INT partner would generally be unwilling to engage in. Overall, relationship quality has been shown to empirically diminish related to higher narcissistic traits within the dyad as determined by relationship satisfaction measures, particularly for the PNTs (Lamkin et al., 2015; Lamkin et al. 2016; Smith et al., 2014; Wurst et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2016). However, as Ye et al. concluded, while

partners reported feeling worst about their relationships, INTs largely overestimated their partners' satisfaction, perhaps exemplifying one of the reasons why PNTs have such dissatisfaction regarding their relationships in the first place.

To highlight the serious interpersonal difficulties experienced in relationships involving narcissism, in a quantitative empirical study, Lamkin et al. (2017) found that there are gender differences in terms of how dysfunction is experienced. These authors uncovered that higher levels of narcissism in women were significantly correlated to increased hostility and anger in the relationship from both parties. Additionally, this research was successfully able to demonstrate the link in overall increased difficulty in communication when one member of the dyad scores more highly on the NPI.

The authors speculate that narcissistic traits may be considered less socially acceptable in women, and therefore, may have different consequences on the overall health of the relationship. This research demonstrates that female narcissists often do not attempt to mask their criticism, insults, coldness, or anger toward their partners, even when observed. Perhaps this is a product of believing that they are in the right with their behavior, or perhaps it is a lack of concern as to how they are being perceived. What this research neglects to determine, is if there may be alternative effects to the relationship or to the partner, such as deteriorating mental health outcomes, or lifestyle changes, for example. It is possible that there may be gendered effects in these realms as well, potentially more related to male narcissistic behaviors. Other research referred to in this examination suggests that this is a factor in the overall picture of the narcissistic dyad.

Game-Playing Love Style. Campbell (1999) was among the first of the personality disorder researchers to associate narcissistic traits to a “game playing love-style” or *ludus*. This is characterized by the desire to have control or power over the relationship, using manipulation and deception as strategies. Often, *ludus* pairs with pragmatism and less selflessness in dealing with romantic partners (Horan et al., 2015). Lamkin et al. (2016) also describe the behavior of INTs as randomly switching between attraction and aloofness, which can cause great distress to PNTs. These authors speculate that by modulating their own affect, INTs can likewise modulate that of their partners’. This specific love-style allows INTs to gain what they would like from their partners, without having to give anything in return that they do not wish to, such as emotional intimacy. Interestingly, Lamkin et al. (2015) report that not only are past and present PNTs aware of their partners’ game-playing love style, but the INTs themselves have full awareness that this is how they tend to engage in romantic interludes.

The strategic manipulation that INTs use within their relationships (particularly in long-term dyads) is in service of self-enhancement, often at the expense of the PNT, or simply for the amusement of the INT (Bosson et al., 2008; Konrath et al., 2014; Määttä et al., 2012; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012a; Tortoriello et al., 2017). Konrath et al. link the INT’s exploitative nature with some heightened abilities to read emotion, which in turn allows for greater skill at manipulating romantic partners. Määttä et al. suggest that it is this ability that causes PNTs pain and hinders their “growth and development” (p. 47) within the relationship. The behaviors that are associated with manipulation may include

“histrionics, discouragement, and double-bind communication” (p. 47). As well, the INT will endorse changed morals in order to suit the given situation as it may benefit them.

Campbell et al. (2002) were among the first researchers to link the game playing love style to desiring domination over partners and the relationship. In this study, PNTs described their partners as not only manipulative, but also over-controlling. The game playing aspect of the INT’s personality was found to be mediated by a level of desire for power and autonomy in the relationship, showing the connective reasons for strategic manipulation of the PNT. Miller et al. (2017) further discuss the domineering interpersonal style of an INT in relation to their romantic partnerships, something which Määttä et al. (2012) and Tortoriello et al. (2017) suggest acts in service of strengthening the INT’s fragile self-esteem. Määttä et al. show that if the partner does not behave in a way that produces external validation of the INT’s self-esteem (narcissistic supply), that the PNT would be subjected to some form of emotional, and sometimes physical punishment. Certain behaviors which may be exhibited by INTs to promote *ludus* or to strategically manipulate may include argumentativeness, lying, lack of honesty and integrity, lack of humility, guilt, or shame, and increased arrogance (Horan et al., 2015; Jonason et al., 2009; Keller et al., 2014; Määttä et al., 2012; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012a; Strelan, 2007, Wink, 1991). Tortoriello et al. (2017) published research that provides an illustrative example of the type of manipulation and game-playing that an INT might engage in. What these researchers found, is that depending on the narcissistic subtype, these individuals knowingly and strategically sought to induce jealousy in their partners

in service of either power and control and/or for revenge, testing the relationship, security, and to compensate for fragile self-esteem.

Keller et al. suggest that the feelings that the PNTs are left with due to these behaviors are frustration, annoyance, and exasperation at their partner. Foster and Brunell (2018) point out that the game playing style serves to keep the PNT guessing about the INT's level of interest, which tends to be more stressful for the PNT than average and leads to increased rates of jealousy and anxiety. A game playing love-style is generally not linked with longer-term romantic success (Campbell et al., 2002; Lamkin et al., & Miller, 2015). Lamkin et al. (2016), Hepper et al. (2014), Smith et al. (2014), and Wurst et al. (2017) show that long-term romantic partners of INTs report higher dissatisfaction with their relationship and partner, and lower commitment, related specifically to the game-playing love style, which can lead to divorce. On the other hand, ultimately INTs may consider a relationship to be successful if they perceive that they have power over their partner.

Lack of Trust and Infidelity. There are two main reasons as to why relationships that have at least one individual possessing a higher level of narcissistic traits tend to be associated with low partner trust and infidelity (Wurst et al., 2017). The game playing love-style as described above is facilitated for the INT partially because they have been shown to be less committed to their relationships than people with lower narcissistic traits, and because of their ease in starting new relationships due to their attractiveness and agentic qualities (Foster & Brunell, 2018; Jonason et al., 2009; Määttä et al., 2012; Wurst et al., 2017). In addition, the personality characteristics of low conscientiousness,

sexually promiscuous mating-style, and exploitative tendencies help to create an environment within the relationship wherein the INT may have multiple infidelities with very little guilt associated (Jones & Paulhus, 2011a, 2011b; Miller et al., 2010).

In a quantitative, empirical study, Tortoriello et al. (2017) found that narcissists' pursuit of alternative mates could be a romantic strategy designed to cause jealousy in their partners. These authors discuss the concept that narcissists have some awareness of the results of their dysfunctional behavior on their partner, and that their motivation may be strategic in terms of personal gain. As mentioned above, the researchers looked at both subtypes, grandiose and vulnerable, and found different motivations for similar outcomes. They found that the grandiose narcissists endorse relationship-threatening behaviors to seek power and control, while the vulnerable subtype endorsed motives such as self-esteem compensation, revenge, and relationship testing.

This research fills an important gap in understanding of the level of awareness that narcissists have when treating their partners badly. Tortoriello et al. were able to partially establish that the manipulative behaviors that narcissists perpetrate in their relationships are based around strategic tactics to achieve an interpersonal goal. Partners of narcissists might be willing to give their mates the benefit of the doubt about certain of their actions, however, this research suggests that this allowance may not be warranted for these types of relationship-threatening behaviors (and potentially other negative behaviors not encompassed by this research).

INTs also have a high level of sensation-seeking or a reward-seeking drive which exhibits as risk-taking, low self-control, and impulsivity, including during the course of a

relationship, such as engaging in infidelity at higher levels (Horan et al., 2015; Jones, Delroy, & Paulhus, 2011b, Ye et al., 2016). Wurst et al. also demonstrated that another likely explanation for the lower lack of commitment that INTs experience in their supposed monogamous relationships is that these individuals are generally at a higher state of attention to potential alternative partners. Lamkin et al. (2015) have termed this phenomenon ‘attention to alternatives’ (AA) in which the INT will have increased levels of noticing and appraising other possible partners even while in committed relationships. As a result of this behavior, levels of trust and satisfaction within these relationships are greatly diminished, and in couples with at least one INT, termination and divorces are experienced far more frequently and at earlier stages of the relationship.

Self-Centered. Spouses of INTs report that they find their partners to be self-centered or selfish (Day et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2014; Määttä et al., 2012). Self-centeredness on its own does not make an individual a narcissist, however, when paired with higher levels of other traits such as lack of empathy and grandiosity, it is perhaps the trait that is one of the more externally visible ones from a behavioral perspective. Selfish behavior might include an assumption that the PNT will service the INTs’ needs without thought to their own, such as demanding all of the attention in any dyad or group setting or being insensitive to partners’ feelings (Määttä et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2014; Wurst et al., 2017). PNTs may feel that they are continually required to be giving to their INT partners, and yet receiving very little in return (Day et al., 2019; Määttä et al., 2012).

Part of the belief system that is engaged for the INT which allows self-centered behavior to continue, is that they will overestimate the level of commitment that the PNT has to the relationship (Brewer et al., 2017; Foster & Campbell, 2005; Longua Peterson & DeHart, 2014). Foster and Campbell determined that the resistance to negative information about how their partners actually view the relationship is in service of a perceived enhancement of relationship functioning. The INT assumes that their partner is lucky to be with them, a derivation of superior or arrogant attitudes common with INTs (Ye et al., 2016; Sedikides et al., 2002). It is for this reason that they may take their partner for granted assuming that selfish behavior will not result in termination of the relationship, or that they can continue to take from their partner without reciprocity or consequence. In addition, INTs will not act on desired change feedback from the PNT because of the overestimation of relationship functioning and/or will respond with overreaction and hostility since change requests would be perceived as a large threat to fragile self-esteem (Ye et al., 2016; Sedikides et al., 2002). The result of this behavior is that PNTs do not receive the desired changes from their partners and may become hesitant in the future to provoke reactions by requesting changes.

Exploitative. A characteristic narcissistic trait is that of the exploitative dimension (APA, 2013). The INT will use their relationship to self-enhance, regardless of the cost to their partner, in service of personal gain (Fatfouta et al., 2017; Keller et al., 2014). As Konrath et al. (2014) point out in a quantitative, empirical study, the exploitative dimension relates to increased emotion-reading abilities, which in turn allows for, and gives motivation for INTs to manipulate PNTs. This research investigates possible links

between exploitativeness used by narcissists as a tool, the trait of empathy, and emotion-reading abilities. The authors highlighted the changes and devolution in narcissists' behavior from the initial stages of the relationship to the more developed, later stages. Konrath et. al discuss the confusion that can result for the partner of the narcissist when experiencing the shift in the dyad dynamic. Narcissism has long been understood to include a diminishment of empathy for other, however, Konrath et al. have demonstrated that those higher in narcissism, most particularly those who score higher in exploitativeness, have a strong ability to "read" (p. 140) the emotions of others. These authors suggest that this is either a mechanism that occurs because the narcissist requires this quality to successfully manipulate people and thus, they develop it as a more consistent strategy, or alternatively, this potentially more innate ability allows the narcissist to manipulate, and thus the strategy is reinforced over time and successes.

As Hepper et al. (2014) state, the INT will "unduly deplete common resources" (p. 1082), creating negative interpersonal effects within a relationship. The demanding and entitled behavior that accompanies exploitative tendencies results in such things as infidelity without guilt and gaslighting, for example. As another example, INTs are more likely to engage in sexual coercion directed at their partners (Keller et al., 2014). Unfortunately, INTs will generally be indifferent to the damage done to others while achieving their personal goals (Jones & Paulhus, 2011a). Some of the negative consequences to relationship quality may include reduced feelings and behaviors of closeness, affection, and relationship satisfaction (Lamkin et al., 2015). Specifically,

PNTs reported that they feel “depleted” (Määttä et al., 2012, p. 45) after experiencing their partner’s exploitative behavior.

Object Relations and Object Constancy. Relationships with an INT tend to be more transactional as opposed to reciprocal. Kernberg, 1975 (as cited in Jones & Paulhus, 2011a) discussed that INTs lack the capability to view themselves and others from a dichotomous perspective, in that someone can have both positive and negative qualities, and that it is possible to continue a respectful relationship with someone who has disappointed or hurt you. When partners react in an unexpected way that an INT dislikes, the INT may perceive that the PNT ceases to hold value to them, and the PNT may instantly be considered lesser than themselves (Jones & Paulhus, 2011a). Treatment of PNTs based on the INTs sense of superiority or a perceived hierarchical value within the relationship devolves accordingly. This may include treating PNTs as “objects that exist only to facilitate their own desires” (Konrath et al., 2014, p. 131) which in turn can also provoke over-reactions and aggression directed towards the PNT (Määttä et al., 2012).

Superiority. According to Lamkin et al. (2015), INTs will use their romantic relationships to help maintain their sense of superiority. Interpersonal relationships are seen simply as vehicles for the INT to enhance their self-concept. This requires constant attention from an admiring other, and the INT can become hostile if the narcissistic supply ceases to flow. Sedikides et al. (2002) include perhaps the most comprehensive discussion about why and how INTs’ sense of superiority may manifest within romantic relationships. INTs have an illusion that “Others Exist for Me” (p. 106), due in part to their feeling of superiority over others, as well as their self-perception and self-

admiration. These authors suggest that the belief system is such that others should care as much about the INTs' wellbeing as they themselves do. In addition, due to the sense of superiority, INTs feel entitled to get what they want, so it is an organic behavior to exploit others in service of this sensation (Jones & Paulhus, 2011a; Sedikides et al., 2002; Ye et al., 2016). When a romantic partner may choose not to, or unwittingly does not fulfill INT expectations in this regard, the PNT could be met with hostility (Sedikides et al., 2002). Because INTs view themselves as superior, including over their romantic partners, relationship dissatisfaction decreases (Ye et al., 2016).

Tolerance, Forgiveness, and Respect. Tolerance, forgiveness, and respect are important elements in maintaining successful relationships (Green et al., 2016; Saini et al., 2015; Tuli, & Mehrotra, 2017). Keller et al. (2014) and Wink (1991) point to research in which PNTs describe their mate as intolerant, as well as reports from INTs themselves in which they acknowledge that they are vindictive and intrusive towards their partners (Keller et al., 2014). Wurst et al. (2017) confirm that INTs lack tolerance and respect, particularly in the sphere of long-term relationships. This follows research such as that of Strelan (2007) who discovered that while INTs can practice self-forgiveness, the forgiveness of others does not occur to nearly the same degree. Based on the links that Strelan established for INTs from lack of forgiveness to a lack of guilt, exploitativeness, and a low level of agreeableness, INTs will rarely take responsibility for the hurts and wrongs that they may cause romantic partners. In other words, because of the sense of entitlement, an INT may easily feel slighted by their partner and react accordingly with little forgiveness, however, if a PNT's moral code has been violated in some way, it is

very unlikely that the INT will experience much guilt over the transgression, and therefore feel little reason to make amends.

Low Agreeableness. INT personalities have shown in literature to consistently be negatively related to the dimension of agreeableness (Horan et al., 2015; Keller et al., 2014; Strelan, 2007). It is well established that one important factor to relationship satisfaction is higher levels of agreeableness, especially in the long term (Tov et al., 2016; Weidmann et al., 2017), and the research is clear that agreeableness is lacking in the INT-PNT dyad for at least one member. The results of a low level of agreeableness in an individual may include critical or hostile behavior when challenged, aggressing, and derogating others to score points. Keller et al. report that the INT's argumentative nature can be highly frustrating and described as obnoxious behavior by partners. On the other hand, Strelan discovered that people low in narcissistic traits showed positive personality correlations of the agreeableness dimension to the ability to forgive others (unlike INTs). It is possible based on this research that to a certain degree, agreeableness in one partner may buoy the longevity of an INT-PNT dyad as it does in other types of relationships, assuming one member possesses this quality.

Critical and Hostile Behavior. In a quantitative, empirical study, Back et al. (2013) advanced the theory that INTs are motivated by two distinct pathways, that of admiration and rivalry (NARC), which can help to explain the dichotomous nature of their interpersonal facility and deficits. For these individuals to maintain their favorable self-view, they require excessive admiration, but over the long-term, their efforts often lead to rejection due to egocentric behaviors. INTs will use self-promotion to gain

admiration, and antagonistic self-protection as a self-defense strategy to protect against social failure. These distinct strategies were shown to be exaggerated in INTs and result in charming and high conflict behaviors respectively, meaning that internal processes and social contacts can be contradictory in nature. These authors propose that this complicated and contradictory dynamic is due to two dimensions of narcissism, that of admiration and rivalry. Not only do these characteristics have effects on self-evaluation and self-esteem, but they greatly affect personal relationships. The latter can result in revenge-seeking behaviors and conflicts. This article is particularly useful for researchers and clinicians for understanding why and when certain dysfunctional behaviors may occur in the context of a romantic dyad with a narcissist. Back et al. highlight many of the reasons why narcissists' romantic partners may choose to involve themselves with a narcissist and why they may stay longer in the relationship, even in the context of dysfunction. Also, the findings of these researchers touch on many reasons as to why a narcissist's motivations, behaviors, and modus operandi within the relationship may seem bewildering to the nonnarcissistic partner.

In continuing the work of Back et al., (2013), Wurst et al. (2017) discovered that partners in a more long-term relationship are increasingly exposed to the antagonistic pathway, with critical and hostile behavior becoming more unpredictable in contentious relationship situations when threat is perceived by the INT. The authors confirm that initial behaviors that are attractive to a mate may gradually transform into bond-destroying behaviors later during the relationship. Initially, romantic partners may be attracted to the narcissists' agentic characteristics, such as their charm and assertiveness,

however, the qualities that are important for longer-term relationship success (more communal attributes of sensitivity and emotional support, for instance) are more absent, and the rivalry traits become more apparent, exhibiting as selfishness, and hostility, for example. This could explain the confusion that nonnarcissistic partners may experience over their mates' behavior changes, why their mates are not the people that they initially conceived them to be, and why they were drawn into the relationship in the first place. The authors point out that many of these negative behaviors only become obvious after engaging with the narcissist for a longer period.

For example, Brummelman et al. (2018), Foster and Brunell (2018), Lamkin et al. (2016), and Longua Peterson and DeHart (2014) discussed that INTs were more likely to use name-calling, complaints, ridicule, and insults when talking with their partners during conflicts, and Lamkin et al. discovered that there were more anger and hostility involved even when discussing noncontentious issues. Not only are discussions with INTs more likely to be intense and hostile, but there is also a greater use of contempt, criticism, and defensiveness, representing three out of four strong predictors of relationship termination from Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse research (Horan et al., 2015). Because of their low levels of agreeability, INTs will often argue with their partners (Ye et al., 2016), meaning that as time goes on, PNTs are subjected to increasingly critical and hostile reactions due to INTs' hypersensitivity.

Aggressive. Because of INTs' aforementioned hypersensitivity to perceived slights (ego threats) and the rivalry motivational processes, aggressive behavior can occur, not just in conflict, but in terms of dominant and competitive behavior towards

their partner (Brummelman et al., 2018; Fatfouta et al., 2017; Foster & Brunell, 2018; Jonason, & Webster, 2012). Brummelman et al. discuss the shame-rage cycle in which INTs will lash out at others when they feel that admiration has not been forthcoming, because their sense of self-worth relies on this form of external validation. If partners cease to provide this, they will be on the receiving end of aggressive behaviors. In addition, if a PNT is perceived to be critiquing or rejecting an INT in some way, they can likewise be expected to receive an angry or aggressive response in return (Hepper et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2011), making relationship feedback very difficult to deliver. Määttä et al. (2012) relate this behavior back to the concept that INTs view partners as objects (ie: INT accessories) rather than subjects with their own unique perspective and experiences, and therefore, feel more easily provoked to aggressive behavior by their partners since they are defying INT expectations. However, Keller et al. (2014) assert that INTs do not need provocation to aggress and will direct their hostility and anger towards not only those who may be perceived as threatening, but also towards “innocent parties” (p. 26), perhaps those who may be in close proximity, such as PNTs.

Derogation. One form of conduct that stems from the INT’s low level of agreeableness and aggressive nature is the derogation of their partner. This behavior is performed in service of self-enhancement at the expense of the relationship and the PNT (Fatfouta et al., 2017; Longua Peterson & DeHart, 2014, Ye et al., 2016), and is enabled by a belief that others, including their partner, are subservient to them (Brummelman et al., 2018). To feel superior, someone else must be lesser than. INTs will derogate anyone who challenges their ideal self-view to discount any negative perception, and it is this

mechanism that helps to buoy an inflated ego. Longua Peterson and DeHart suggest that since the wellbeing of PNTs is of little concern, INTs use derogation to maintain a power imbalance while increasing their own sense of self-worth. As Carlson et al. (2011) state, INTs “can acknowledge that others see them less positively but can choose to disregard the feedback because they question the competency of those who judge them” (p. 287).

Blame and Credit. INTs will not only derogate their partner to feel better about themselves, but they will also blame failures on their partner and take credit for successes, whether earned or not (Hepper et al., 2014; Wurst, 2017). This self-serving bias is enabled by their exploitative nature and can also be a hypersensitivity to critique (Miller et al., 2010). As with derogation, misplaced blame and credit are in service of self-enhancement at the expense of another. Brummelman et al. (2018) discuss that INTs believe relationships fall under a zero-sum principle in which only one person can be the best, so any failure of another is a success for them and vice versa, unlike non-INTs who believe that both parties in a relationship are worthy and can get what they want. INTs will extend blame to their partners for problems in the relationship (Keller et al., 2014; Thomaes et al., 2013) and refuse to take any personal responsibility, so this coupled with a talent for manipulation could create a confusing environment for PNTs. INTs have a belief that they are entitled to praise, but if a partner were to give negative feedback, the PNT would be considered noncredible (Ye et al., 2016). In fact, Määttä et al. (2012) found that INTs will even blame their partners for their own flaws when they see them mirrored, even in a minor way. According to Brummelman et al. blaming partners and taking all credit increases tension and stress in the relationship and for the PNT over time.

Experiences of Partners of INTs

Partner Mood and Behavior

Certain research has assessed some of the mood and behavior states for PNTs currently participating in relationships with INTs. What these studies uncovered is that PNTs show higher levels of hostility and mood disruptions, such as anxiety and depression. Both Keller et al. (2014) and Lamkin et al. (2016) found that PNTs will react to their partners with elevated hostility, anger, and irritation, which is unsurprising when interacting with someone who is self-centered and hostile themselves.

In a quantitative, empirical analysis, Keller et al. (2014) demonstrate that there are often behavior shifts that occur over time in relationships where at least one person is a narcissist, particularly in that both parties tend to increase in aggressive behaviors, potentially because of mutual frustration. Keller et al. examined the characteristics of a romantic dyad where one or both members scored high on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). These authors found that in observing interactions between both members of the dyad, aggression increased positively when related to narcissism scores. The major value of this study is based on the description of behaviors within the dyad which mirror each other to a certain degree. It is entirely possible that narcissists may attract other narcissists (theory of homophily), bring out the worst of behavior in their partners, or both. There may be similar mutual forms of behaviors currently untested in this kind of unique dyad where one or both partners score higher on the NPI, or on the other hand, perhaps some other behaviors simply become more polarized to balance out each other within the dyad.

Interestingly, Brunell and Campbell (2011) reported that PNTs were very much aware that their partners exploited them and played games with them. These authors pointed to research by Campbell et al. (2004) in which PNTs regretted becoming involved with INTs due to the heavy emotional toll that the relationship took on them compared with other relationships involving non-INT partners. The PNTs reported elevated levels of anger in the aftermath of the terminations of the relationship, but also reported being glad that it was over. This research suggests that there may indeed be an increased level of cause-and-effect occurrences for dysfunctional behaviors within these types of dyads.

For example, Lamkin et al. (2015) found that there is a connection for partners of individuals with entitled and exploitative traits to the experience of elevated levels of anxiety and depression. These authors suggest that this may be related to the overall low levels of relationship satisfaction seen in these dyads. Day et al. (2019) quantified the levels of disruptions that people close to INTs experienced and found that there was a significantly increased burden over regular relationships, with anxiety levels at 69% and depression levels at 82%, similar to levels seen in actual clinical samples. A subanalysis determined that those in romantic relationships reported significantly more distress than those individuals with a familial relationship. In a step further, Day et al. determined that there is remembered trauma, even after the relationship has terminated. Narcissistic traits and partner suffering seem to go hand in hand. It should be noted, however, that much of this research does not distinguish if these mood and behavior states began as a result of being in a relationship with an INT or if they existed beforehand.

In addition, the unpredictability of the INT love style, switching between attraction and aloofness or other negative mood states can cause distress for PNTs (Lamkin et al., 2016). In essence, relationships with INTs are linked with emotional upheaval and is ultimately very confusing for PNTs who initially paired with seemingly wonderful, charming, and outgoing partners (Ye et al., 2016).

Changes Over Time in the Relationship

Initially, INTs are perceived as exciting and attractive in many ways. As seen in the aforementioned research, INTs are skilled at drawing in potential partners, however, over time and increased exposure, PNTs will become privy to the less desirable traits associated with narcissism. As Brummelman et al. (2018) affirm, “narcissists’ charming first impressions crumble with the passage of time” (p. 50), confirming the research of Campbell et al. (2002) which showed that INTs actively use deceptive self-presentation that cannot be maintained in deeper acquaintance. Healthy maintenance of longer-term relationships requires elements of agreeableness and empathy, something that INTs simply cannot provide to effective levels (Carlson & Lawless DesJardins, 2015; Hepper et al., 2014). Whether married or not, relationships with at least one INT are reportedly unsatisfying and become more so over time for both individuals in the dyad (Foster & Brunell, 2018; Ye et al., 2016), however, the PNT’s experience is increasingly much more negative than that of the INT (Brunell & Campbell, 2011). For example, Di Pierro et al. (2017) and Lamkin et al. (2016) research highlighted the abrupt switch that INTs can make between loving and affectionate to critical and hostile, with the negative states becoming more apparent the less the PNT is willing to indulge INTs’ needs for

admiration and their self-centered behavior. This could be the reason for the emergence of faster and more aggressive and hostile actions towards PNTs. Tumultuous dyads are not unusual with an INT due to dramatically shifting satisfaction and commitment levels when compared with non-INT partners (Foster & Twenge, 2011; Lavner et al., 2016). The volatility and lack of stability are wearing for any long-term relationship.

Campbell and Campbell (2009) advanced a model of narcissism wherein they describe two phases of a relationship with an INT, the emerging and the enduring zones. The emerging zone is at the newer stages of acquaintance and the enduring zone is when a longer relationship with an INT develops and more negative narcissistic behaviors begin to exhibit, such as arrogance and aggression. These authors discuss that INTs return cyclically back to the emerging zone because of the positive feedback that they receive from others. Leckelt et al. (2015) and Wurst et al. (2017) explain that these personality shifts are the result of activation of the two separate behavioral pathways of admiration and rivalry (NARC) (explained in the Critical and Hostile Behavior section), with rivalry emerging later in the relationship and being the primary reason as to why narcissistic relationships fail. (Rivalry is the drive to protect against negative self-views by derogating others.) The implications are that PNTs may make decisions for the future of their relationships based on their initial impressions of INTs, only to realise later that the INTs are not the people they thought they were. These distinct shifts in personality are reportedly highly confusing for partners and can cause distress (Lamkin et al., 2016).

The quantitative, empirical research of Konrath et al., and Luminet (2014) touches on an explanation of why narcissists may be particularly successful in maintaining the

initial stages of a relationship, but also why this may change and become confusing to the nonnarcissistic partner in the longer-term. If narcissists are particularly skilled at exploiting emotional vulnerability and can mimic empathy in response to emotional cues, when they are in the process of putting energy into wooing their partner, they could potentially appear as uniquely attentive and responsive to their partner. Once their partner is fully invested in the relationship, they may not have a need to continue the pretense, except in crisis points when it becomes crucial to pull their partner back into the commitment. The narcissist's intentions and manipulations may be seen through the lens of someone who subscribes to more wholesome motivations for these types of actions (i.e., a nonnarcissistic partner). The narcissist may appear to be emotionally competent to the partner, especially initially, and there may be little understanding of what eventually has gone wrong in the dyad. This may make it easier for a nonnarcissist partner to excuse moments of dysfunctional behavior, and therefore, a shifting of boundaries occurs for what is considered acceptable behavior, akin to any abusive situation (Taylor et al., 2013).

In addition, INTs demand perfection from their partners (Smith et al., 2018) and they initially view PNTs through the lens of an unrealistic ideal based on PNTs' external and agentic characteristics (as mentioned in the Partners of Narcissists section). Once the PNT presents as a multi-dimensional individual having flaws and needs of their own which may be more communal in nature (such as kindness and emotional intimacy), the INT no longer places them on a pedestal of perfection (Doneva, 2014; Keller et al., 2014). The idealization of the PNT by the INT can fade very quickly (Ye et al., 2016).

This diminishment can trigger the INT's derogation of their partner since they feel entitled to such perfection and are disdainful of communal behaviors (Di Pierro et al., 2017; Keller et al., 2014). The INT feels that they themselves are perfect, so they expect that their partner, as a reflection of their own success and image, to be so as well (Smith et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2016). As Brunell and Campbell (2011) state, "narcissists repeatedly initiate new relationships, damage the relationship and hurt their partners, and then move on to another relationship" (p. 349).

Emotional and Psychological Abuse in the Relationship

In general, three factors that have been strongly linked in interplay to abusiveness turning physical are trait anger, childhood physical abuse history, and alcohol consumption (Maldonado et al., 2014). However, while physical violence can sometimes occur related to narcissistic traits in conjunction with these and other issues, emotional and psychological abuse is typically prevalent in these relationships related to narcissistic characteristics alone (Carton & Egan, 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan, & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Gormley & Lopez, 2010). Therefore, relationships which have included physical violence are not included in this examination, while many or potentially all participant relationship will likely have elements of emotional and psychological abuse.

In fact, the higher the levels of narcissism, the higher the reported levels of emotional and psychological abuse (Gewirtz-Meydan, & Finzi-Dottan, 2018). Emotional and psychological abuse has been shown to be distinct as a phenomenon from physical abuse, and the effects are not dependent on the presence of physical abuse (Dichter et al., 2018; Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018). Since other factors besides narcissism

create an environment where physical abuse is perpetrated, only emotional and psychological abuse will be discussed here as it relates to narcissistic characteristics.

Relationship orientated emotional and psychological abuse (EPA) is defined as nonphysical behaviors, either coercive or aversive, which are designed to impair a partner's sense of well-being (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Shepherd-McMullen et al., 2015). Tactics for EPA include using fear, control, intimidation, shame, humiliation, deception, sexual coercion, blame, dismissal, derogation, and insults (Blinkhorn et al., 2016; Carton & Egan, 2017; Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017; Määttä et al., 2012; Shepherd-McMullen et al., 2015). Manipulations which may include discouragement, double-bind communication, and histrionics (Määttä et al., 2012). Certain defensive strategies such as denying, minimizing, and blaming have been linked with EPA (Gormley & Lopez, 2010). Reed and Enright (2006) and Shepherd-McMullen et al. have defined 8 types of EPA: criticizing, ridiculing, dominance/control, purposeful ignoring, threats of abandonment, threats of harm, damage to personal property, and general destabilization (ie: treating as inferior, intimidating, or isolating). However, Jordan et al. (as cited by Shepherd-McMullen et al. 2015) combined these concepts into four dimensions of EPA: "a) denigrating damage to partner's self-image or self-esteem b) passive-aggressive withholding of emotional support, c) threatening behavior, explicit and implicit, and d) restricting personal territory and freedom" (p. 1554).

In a qualitative study, Määttä et al. (2012) provide first-hand accounts of some of the experiences that partners of narcissists have within the context of their relationships through the lens of subject-object relationships. They used inductive content analysis

taken from anonymous post chains on the open site Registered Association for Support for the Victims of Narcissists in Finland to describe life with a narcissist in an intimate relationship, and how partners view their narcissistic spouse. (However, there was no face-to-face contact between researchers and participants or verification of matching stories to individuals.) The authors reached the conclusions that a great deal of narcissistic behavior caused pain to their intimate partners due to manipulation, that the narcissists restricted their partners socially based on their behavior, and that much of the narcissists' behavior stems from issues with self-esteem.

The value of this research lies in the personal accounts of individuals who may have been intimately partnered with a narcissist and their experiences within the relationship. This helps to provide a framework of understanding and background to add consistency in terms of a deeper examination of nonnarcissistic partners. In additional research, uncovered themes would not have to be framed in terms of understanding the narcissist themselves, as the researchers in this study have done, but rather in the context of how certain behaviors affected the partner.

Gewirtz-Meydan and Finzi-Dottan (2017) and Warrener and Tasso (2017) shed some light on why narcissistic emotional and psychological abuse occurs. The entitlement and exploitative subtraits of narcissism predict aggressive behavior, and Warrener and Tasso found that entitlement alone was a better predictor of abuse than all other variables tested. Gewirtz-Meydan and Finzi-Dottan state that INTs will aggress particularly after perceived criticism or a "blow to the ego" (p. 299), however, they will also aggress towards partners when someone else offends them, or even in the absence of

any kind of provoking behavior. In addition, INTs are far more accepting of violence, and these attitudes show that they may perpetrate increased levels of EPA simply because they find it more tolerable to do so (Blinkhorn et al., 2016). Also, INTs will use tactics to enhance their own feelings of self-worth at the expense of damage to their partners and to the relationship, particularly during conflict situations (Longua Peterson & DeHart, 2014, Gormley & Lopez, 2010). For example, an INT may argue viciously for the sake of winning and scoring points, rather than discussing the situation rationally. Gormley and Lopez demonstrated that men with elevated entitlement scores, or who avoid intimacy were at risk of dominating their partners, and women who exhibited both of those characteristics in addition to perceiving themselves to have few stressful problems were likewise at risk. Longua Peterson and DeHart also state that INTs will hold grudges, are less likely to refrain from negative comments, and become more likely to engage in infidelity because of conflict.

Coercive Control and Restrictive Engulfment

One form of EPA that can occur in relationships is coercive control or a version of coercive control called restrictive engulfment. Narcissism significantly predicts the use of restrictive engulfment (Carton & Egan, 2017). Both acts are defined as the use of tactics, aside from physical violence, designed to maintain dominance over a partner (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018; Crossman et al., 2016; Dichter et al., 2018; Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2019). Behaviors may include isolating, intimidation, or monitoring one's partner for example (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018), and restrictive engulfment specifically describes controlling behavior around social activities “through

possessiveness and jealousy to increase partner availability and dependency” (Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2019, p. 27). Crossman et al. and Dichter et al. remind that coercive control can continue even after the relationship has terminated.

Gaslighting

Another form of EPA that can occur in INT relationships is a type of manipulation colloquially termed gaslighting. As Horan et al. (2015), Konrath et al. (2014), and Nagler et al. (2014) demonstrate, since INTs are better able to recognize certain emotional states of others, have socioemotional control, lie for gain, and possess low empathy and high exploitativeness, they are more adept at manipulating their partners. This manipulation is designed, as many of the roots of INTs’ negative behaviors are, to compensate for a fragile sense of self-esteem by gaining control of their partner for their own purposes (Tortoriello et al, 2017; Wurst et al., 2017). Gaslighting as a term is derived from the movie “Gaslight” in which a woman’s partner deliberately attempts to make her feel crazy by manipulating her and her environment (Abramson, 2014). As Abramson asserts, while the real-world goal may not be to drive their partner crazy, an individual using gaslighting tactics is attempting to distort the truth as their partner sees it, so that the partner questions their own beliefs, reactions, and memories. This may or may not be a conscious choice on the part of the gaslighter. INTs endorse a sense of superiority over others, including their partners, and to promote this self-belief, and dismissal and derogation of partners’ opinions and perceptions are favored tactics (Fatfouta et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2016). INTs can thus eliminate disagreement and challenges to their sense of superiority by undermining PNTs’ credibility, both externally

and internally (Abramson, 2014; Gass & Nichols, 1988). This could leave PNTs questioning their own instincts and perception of the world, as well as becoming frustrated, confused, and mistrustful (Gass & Nichols, 1988).

Outcomes from Emotional and Psychological Abuse on Partners

INTs are very likely to cause pain and distress to romantic partners (Gerwartz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2017). Perpetration of emotional and psychological abuse is associated with lower rates of relationship satisfaction, both for the perpetrator and survivor, and as the above research has shown, relationships involving at least one INT have rapidly decreasing and much lower levels of reported relationship satisfaction. Gerwartz-Meydan and Finzi-Dottan empirically demonstrate that individuals with higher levels of narcissism do in fact perpetrate more EPA towards their partner. In addition, having low levels of empathy implies that INTs likely don't concern themselves much about the negative consequences of their abusive behavior on their partners. Miller et al. (2007) found that "the strongest impairment associated with narcissistic personality disorder is the distress or pain and suffering experienced not by the narcissist themselves, but by his or her significant others" (p. 7). This is predictive even when other personality disorders are controlled for.

The literature review of Furnham et al. (2013) addresses the concept that the dysfunctional behavior that a narcissist exhibits within a relationship is unlikely to change over time, but rather becomes more profoundly inherent. The implications of this research suggest that the partner of a narcissist may experience increasing distress based on the length of time that the relationship continues.

These authors address not only measures, but also psychological explanatory models, in addition to the narcissist's social behaviors and practices. In particular, the Five Factor Model of personality, evolutionary theory, mating behavior, and interpersonal behaviors are discussed in great detail. This research is highly useful for researchers to provide a framework of understanding of narcissism and the discussions regarding personality characteristics, predatory mating strategies, and other relationship behaviors and give a great deal of information regarding what a partner of a narcissist may expect to experience within the course of the relationship. Of critical importance, this research demonstrates the danger (both emotional and potentially physical) of engaging romantically with a narcissist, particularly if some form of ego threat to the narcissist exists in the moment.

Unfortunately, the effects of EPA on PNTs can be complex and long-lasting. Crossman et al. (2016) provide evidence that women with controlling, but nonviolent partners meet the cutoff scores using the Women's Experiences of Battering scale and showed that the emotional and mental health experiences were similar to those of women who had been physically beaten by their partners. Estefan et al. (2016) reinforce that EPA "can actually cause higher levels of emotional distress and be more damaging to mental health than other forms of abuse" (p. 1398). Some examples of behaviors provided by participants that Crossman et al. studied were like other reported abuse situations, in that women did not disclose the truth about what was happening in their relationship out of fear or embarrassment, that they had no power or control in the relationship, and that they

would placate their partners out of self-protection. Coping strategies were also similar to those who had experienced physical violence.

The mental health outcomes reported by individuals subject to EPA may include fearfulness, personal distress, anxiety, guilt, diminished self-esteem, diminished or loss of identity, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, feelings of inadequacy, negative health perceptions, cognitive impairment, learned helplessness, resentment, and depression (Crossman and Hardesty, 2018; Crossman et al, 2016; Estefan et al., 2016; Gerwartz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2017; Gormely & Lopez, 2010; Reed & Enright, 2006; Shepherd-McMullen et al., 2015; Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2019). In addition, Estfan et al., Reed and Enright, and Toplu-Demirtas et al. established that the mental health effects of emotional abuse can be more long-lasting, possibly due to personal doubt and resentment about the injustice of the abuse. It is possible, therefore, that PNTs may leave the relationship questioning their self-worth, judgement, and instincts.

Summary

Interpersonal relationships can be greatly affected by both the positive and negative traits that are associated with narcissism. Literature delineating the main traits from both a clinical diagnosis perspective and a research-based perspective supports the idea that the individuals affected most negatively by higher levels of narcissistic traits are the people closest to the INT, in many cases, the intimate partners. The traits that seem to be most greatly associated with dysfunction in romantic relationships include the lack of empathy, exploitativeness (manipulation), the requirements for excessive attention, and dishonesty, especially as it relates to the game-playing love style.

The literature points to the concept that INTs are incredibly unaware of, and/or are unwilling to engage in the behaviors that are required for the maintenance of long-term relationships, and that they are drawn to agentic or extrinsic characteristics in partners. However, it is precisely the opposite characteristics that they are in disdain of which promote behaviors conducive for the maintenance of longer-term relationships, suggesting that this disdain versus relationship-sustaining-behaviors dichotomy might be increasingly present in longer-term INT-PNT dyads.

It is clear from the literature that the longer partners remain in INTs' orbits, the more increasingly negative the effects of the narcissistic traits become on the relationship, and the personal wellbeing of PNTs is often damaged in the process. INTs are very capable of and willing to perpetrate unique forms of emotional abuse based around the manipulation of their partners for both gain and personal pleasure. Considering this, the idea that some PNT individuals may see a system of cost and benefit differently in relationships, particularly as it relates to the INT-PNT dyad, is worth exploring. In addition, there may be personality characteristics that the PNT endorses, relating to either of their partner or themselves, past experiences, or certain environments within relationships that the PNT determines are more favorable for longevity. It is through the interview process and narrative analysis that the stories of these relationships, as told by the PNT may shed light on this important, but relatively unexplored perspective, the process of which, is detailed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore how PNTs describe the engagement, duration, and termination of their relationships with INTs. Any changes in the PNTs' self-views were documented as they described the full course of the relationship trajectory, as well as attributions made which might explain the endurance of the connection. To fill the gap in the current literature, this study was guided by a qualitative narrative research method. Face-to-face or zoom-based semi structured interviews with participants provide the core of the data to develop an understanding of the PNTs themselves, their experiences of their relationships, the longevity, and subsequent terminations. The zoom video-conferencing program was used when necessary to adhere to social distancing guidelines imposed by COVID-19 guidelines or participant concerns.

Stories about the experiences within romantic relationships suit narrative analysis with its trajectories of beginning, middle, and end, as well as the development of turning points throughout. These stories focus on the social interactions between actors, and how they each play a role in the creation of the narrative. Contextual information about participants will be particularly meaningful to help situate participants' personal narratives individually and across perspectives and was informed by the screening tool as well as certain interview responses. Participants were very carefully chosen via a screening process that was designed with a preestablished benchmark of what partnering with a narcissistic individual means. Participants were drawn from a diverse range of background variations based on a wide distribution of flyer advertising in different geographical-cultural areas and on Facebook (not to personal acquaintances), and once

criteria were met, were invited for an interview. This examination emphasizes narrative concepts developed through thematic analysis rather than focusing on how the participants tell the story (narrative structure). The intention of this chapter is to relay deep, descriptive information about the design and methodology so that the reader may glean adequate knowledge needed to reproduce the study and to have confidence in the four criteria of trustworthiness, that of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Question

The conceptualization of the qualitative nature of this research in its entirety stemmed first from the development of the research question. It became apparent from the tone of the question and subquestions that the important characteristics included a telling of the story of a relationship with an INT. As previously mentioned, relationships have a natural progression that lends well to the chronological nature of narrative analysis. In addition, the subquestions showed curiosity regarding who the PNTs are as people, which delved into the contextual nature of social interactions. Above all, it was the meaning that each PNT created from their experiences in the telling of their stories and the agency displayed throughout their personal trajectory which were key features, both being inherent in narrative research (McAlpine, 2016).

RQ1- Qualitative: What are the experiential narratives of former partners who have been in a long-term relationship with an individual who exhibits narcissistic traits, from meeting to post-termination?

Sub-RQ1- Qualitative: How did former partners of individuals with narcissistic traits view themselves before, within, and after their relationship?

Sub-RQ2- Qualitative: How do former partners who have been in a long-term relationship with an individual who exhibits narcissistic traits make sense of the relationship's longevity?

As can be seen in Chapter 2, individuals who remain in a romantic relationship with partners who exhibit high levels of narcissistic traits can experience many negative dyadic events that may greatly impact their sense of wellbeing. The stories of these experiences have not been explored in a way that has ever been focused on the PNT (as opposed to the INT), nor has there been extensive empirical research from this point-of-view. The prevailing research points to the need for understanding and intervention for PNTs, however, what knowledge currently exists is derived either from specific tests and limited facets of the relationship or personality, or is mentioned as incidental to the INT's thoughts, behaviors, or personality. Information about PNTs and what their experiences of these relationships may potentially look like for the above chapters has been cobbled together via gleaning from snippets available in hundreds of empirical studies based on narcissists and their relationships. Not only has the focus avoided the PNT experience within current literature, but there is nothing apparent in academic research that ties together a deep and rich picture of life with an INT, rendering any preestablished theoretical conception difficult to create. As well, major variables involved with engaging in relationships with INTs have not been established.

It is for these reasons that a qualitative design was chosen for this examination. Empirical testing focusing on specific aspects of the phenomenon are not appropriate due to the limitations in methodology for obtaining complex and wider understanding, as well as the need for more exploratory research. As mentioned, comprehensive information about individuals who live closely in the sphere of a narcissist simply does not exist in the empirical domain, particularly around those people who, research suggests, are the most highly affected by INTs' actions, the romantic partner. A qualitative design is appropriate to create a more multi-faceted and connective picture of this phenomenon, especially due to the dearth of current research in this area. As Creswell (2009, 2018) affirms, qualitative research is more suitable for examining meaning behind complex social issues, particularly in the case of exploratory research. The goal of this current study is to avoid a narrowing of focus and to investigate made-meaning and perception behind these unique dyadic interactions.

There are five major qualitative design structures that are discussed by Creswell and Creswell (2018), including grounded theory, ethnography, case studies, phenomenological research, and narrative research which were considered as a possible structure for this research.

In grounded theory work, a theoretical model is established through the viewpoints espoused in the participants' data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Inductive strategies are used to develop increasingly more abstracted and synthesized categories that are a culmination of emerging data patterns (Charmaz, 1996; Wertz et al., 2011). In this way, meaning is gradually constructed in layers and refined against emerging theory.

Another main distinguishing feature is the concurrent interrelationship and of data collection and comparative analysis, which evolve symbiotically (Charmaz, 1996). This may involve a multi-faceted data collection process using interviews, observations, personal records, and a variety of other sources of data to the point of theory saturation. This may mean a larger participant base than some of the other traditions. However, while theory generation may occur in the process of this current research, it is not the ultimate focal point, and the scope of this investigation is not as broad for data collection.

Ethnographic design is often most appropriate in examining shared cultures, including language and behaviors in specific and natural settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Cruz & Higgenbottom, 2013). Ethnography is involved with the interpretations and analysis of these cultures and social groups, primarily relying on observations, interviews, and other meaningful data, with extensive time spent in the field (Creswell, 1998). As Cruz and Higgenbottom and Griffin and Bengry-Howell (2008) point out, there is, out of necessity, a degree of immersion in the studied world by the researcher and thus one requires awareness of this certainty. The cultural meanings and interpretations which emerge from this type of study relate to significant practices and have been based on loosely structured design strategies. For these reasons, this tradition generally requires a lengthy time commitment. In two ways ethnography would not be appropriate for this study design in that PNT individuals are not certain to be from shared cultures, and the time commitment along with the personal investment is unrealistic for me.

Case studies rely on in-depth analysis of a particular case which might include individuals or other processes or events (Creswell, 2018). As Yin (2014) describes, case

study inquiry, “investigates a contemporary phenomenon” “within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident” (p. 16). The implication of this is that an understanding by the researcher of participants’ contexts as they apply to the phenomenon is of high importance. Multiple sources of data are generally used, including observation, interviews, documents, and archival information (Creswell, 1998). Detailed descriptions are contained within patterned themes and interpreted by the researcher. If more than one case is studied, a cross-case analysis is performed. Similarly to the issues with ethnographic research, the current phenomenon under study is not the product of a “bounded system” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61), common to a time and place. In addition, the prolonged time required to collect extensive data for this structure may be prohibitive, although as Yin asserts, perhaps not to the same extent as ethnography.

The phenomenological tradition was considered for this study as it directly involves the investigation of the lived experience of the phenomenon as described by individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is conducted generally via interviews of participants, after which the essence of the phenomenon is distilled into descriptive themes and categories. The meaning units that are created have particular significance which enriches the whole picture of the phenomenon (Wertz et al., 2011). A process of epoche is required in which the researcher sets aside preconceived notions of the phenomenon for a process of subjective openness to occur (Moustakas, 1994). While this methodology would have been applicable to the characteristics of the data at hand, the

nature of a relationship and thus the research questions lend themselves more to an order of chronology, not suggested by the typical phenomenological approach.

While all these traditions share the ability for the researcher to perform a deeper and exploratory look into phenomena and meaning, the narrative approach was ultimately deemed to be the most appropriate for the structure of this research and the research questions involved.

Narrative Analysis

The goal of this research is to systematically investigate the telling of stories based on participants' lived experiences of partnering with an INT. Chase (2003) describes that narratives are an important way that individuals make sense of the world around them, their feelings, and their experiences, as well as a way to transmit meaning to others. Moen (2006) explains that narrative research is concerned with how individuals assign meaning through their personal stories and is emphatic that the "human experience is always narrated" (p. 60). Smith (2016) relays that narratives are, "singularly good resources" (p. 211) to communicate a rich understanding of a phenomenon. It is in this way, that as a society we can better understand related human experiences and wisdom in a more global sense (Kim 2016; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), which can, in turn, reshape our culture. This research is a deeper look at a smaller group of participants who have experienced entering, conducting, and ending a relationship with individuals of potentially similar characteristics. These stories are a remembrance and reconstruction of the lived experience, which will determine how the narrations occur and which stories are chosen for telling (Josselson, 2011).

In narrative analysis, smaller groups of participants are common (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to develop the complex and layered depth within and between each story. Literary terms are often used to guide the analysis and for interpretation of experiences (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) and it is the plot of these stories which is intended to capture the core of importance of partnering with an INT. Clandinin and Huber (2010) and Wertz et al. (2011) suggest that there may be a variety of theoretical frameworks employed in the course of analysis, and this method tends to obligate the researcher less to structured methodology. As this is a glimpse into PNT lives and the meaning they make from experiences, the research could be considered to originate from a sociological perspective (Hyvärinen, 2016) with a naturalist focus (McAlpine, 2016).

As Creswell (2013) states, narrative analysis “begins with the lived and told stories of individuals” (p. 70) to understand their described experiences and could be the full life story, or stories within it (Josselson, 2011). This process is generally conducted primarily through interviews or conversational formats (Clandinin & Huber, 2010), however, other forms of data collection may occur as well. In the case of this research, part of the purpose is to allow for a new set of voices to be heard and understood around the phenomenon of narcissism, in this case, the experiences of partners who have their own unique perspectives. For this reason, it felt imperative for participant stories to stand alone in the data collection process, unclouded by input from other sources. Clandinin and Huber point out that there may be a necessity to conduct additional interviews and member checking to ensure completeness in the telling of participant stories.

Kim (2016) proposes, “Narrative meaning concerns diverse aspects of experience that involve human actions of events that affect human beings” (p. 190). Stories are the vehicle for rendering meaning to experiences. Wertz et al. (2011) suggest that meaning is derived from participant’s choice of words, and Josselson (2011) Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2007) reinforce this concept in that the story points of beginning, middle, and end represent the wider plot consisting of the meaning and connections in a person’s life. The chosen stories represent a glimpse into how the person constructs an understanding of a part of their life and connects or differentiates themselves from others. Etherington (2013) intimates that it is from the reconstruction and telling of stories that a sense of self and identity is reformulated. The telling is a construction based on specific events occurring in specific settings, and the interpretation of which is designed to reflect the rich meaning that people assign to events such as relationships with INTs. Narrative analysis, in this way, can help the reader to make sense of the ambiguity and complexity of the lived experiences of individuals who have partnered with an INT.

There is a variety of different types of narratives available to a researcher who seeks this form of analysis, including a biographical study, autoethnography, life history, and oral history (Creswell, 2013). As this research will focus the stories told by participants for a particular part of their lives (their relationships with INTs), as collected by me, and cause and effect are not the focus, the form of a biographical study is the most appropriate choice. In addition, this research could be classified as a holistic-content approach to understanding the meaning relayed by participants. The focus will be on the

content of their stories as opposed to how the stories are told, without investigating for previously defined categories (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

Creswell (2013) and Josselson (2011) suggest that a researcher must first have an understanding of participants' cultural, historical, ideological, and social contexts in order to recognize story transitions, tensions, and interconnections. What this means is that the individuals who participate in this research are also themselves part of the data and thus, the story. It is important to collect this contextual data from each PNT, since who they are as people is the root for the telling of their experiences with INTs and frames their unique viewpoints. In addition, the details regarding places and circumstances involved in the retelling allow the researcher and reader to situate the wisdom and meaning that is being communicated to help constitute their own sense of understanding (Wong, 2018). As Josselson describes the collection of these details, they are the foundation for the construction of narratives. The context serves to provide an order to the internal experience of participants, and Josselson points out that contextual accounts can present themselves in "multivocal" (p. 226) ways reflected in several parts of the telling. Moen (2006) also makes an interesting point about the usefulness of context gathering. This deeper detail about participants, place, and temporality may allow for comparisons to other contexts by the reader based on shared characteristics.

Chase (2003) states that, "personal narratives, no matter how unique and individual, are inevitably social in character" (p. 79). Josselson (2011) intimates that meaning develops through social discourse in the process of constructing linkages between time and place and events as lived by participants. In using a narrative model,

the researcher will move beyond the direct context, to a certain degree, and examine not only what the meaning is behind parts of the story, but also the social significance (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The social elements that provide layers to discourses involve the primary interactions between the PNT and the INT, these individuals and other characters in the story, and the interactions of researcher and participant.

Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) emphasize the importance of the social interaction in terms of contextual information. It allows for the reader to grasp how the characters play their roles within their cultures and the nuances and complexities of their social worlds. The participant's culture itself may impose meaning onto events as well, which may reflect in the process of narration (Moen, 2006). As Wong (2018) discusses, there are cultural-social expectations of certain forms of behaviors that also shape how the participants, researcher, and readers may interpret or relate a narrative. Social interaction entails increased levels of richness in understanding, and layered perspectives on any given event may enter the telling. The social nature of narrated human interaction lends itself well to the applicability of social exchange theories as a framework. During the narration of the story of a relationship between a PNT and INT, epiphanies, tensions, and transitions will likely be explained by the cost-benefit balance of the interactions as they relate to the emotionality of any situation. An example of this is alluded to by Wong in that social narratives delve into queries around "what characters are entitled to do and why they have that right" (p. 252). Based on past evidence in research, it appears that INTs regularly violate social expectations in relationships, creating dysfunction in the cost-benefit balance as time goes on, and thus damaging both the relationship and

perhaps the emotional wellbeing of their partners. There may be important story points that discuss these violations which are informed by preexisting social norms.

To conduct narrative analysis, the script is read for emerging themes, both within a participant's telling, and across all participants' stories (Creswell, 2013; Hyvärinen, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995), or as Josselson (2011) terms it, the "dynamic whole" (p. 226). Smith (2016) defines a theme as a pattern that is woven through any given story or stories. The data derived from participant stories and the chronological sequence of events and predicaments of the characters become the basis of the eventual plot. Cornelissen (2017) suggests that the outcome of this form of research helps to explain why and how certain events evolve the way that they do, and how they result in specific outcomes via turning points. The sequences of the plot contain implications of causality leading to resolution (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). In this research, the experiences of participants should result in common themes regarding partnering with an INT, making up the core of the study outcomes.

Because this narrative research is based on the first-person stories of participants revolving around partnering with an INT, special attention was paid to relevant moments within stories of these relationships. The stories themselves were also examined for details designed to convey a sense of who each character, particularly the PNT, is personally. However, individual stories were not necessarily told in sequential order and there were revisitations of moments in time throughout, therefore, I reorganized plot points to create a more linear representation. This process of restorying required me to collect key elements of stories for analysis which were reread and renegotiated multiple

times and then organized by chronology (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), designed, as Chase (2003) established, to provide an answer to the question “so what?” (p. 80). The intent was to preserve the integrity of the lived experience and social reality of the raw data while conducting the chronological restorying. In a sense, the reordering of the stories reflects the natural progression of the reality of life, however, the demarcation of beginning, middle, and end provides an order that is perhaps more precise than the organic flow of the social world (Jovchelovich & Bauer, 2007). It is during this process in which a causal link between concepts appeared, and meaning became increasingly clear, a form of narrative smoothing to produce coherence and to engage the reader (Kim, 2016). Once these patterns or themes emerged, the sequenced reconstruction highlighted the main relevant factors that may have shaped these individuals’ experiences (Creswell, 1998). The sequence of events in the stories told by the PNT relay the story of a partnership with an INT and were restoried to reflect the relationship from beginning, middle, and end.

Narrative analysis is an interpretive methodology (Wertz et al., 2011) with a close collaboration between participant and researcher that may be subjective in nature. The co-construction of reality takes place naturally within the interactions between participant and researcher as the story emerges and questions are asked (Creswell, 2013).

Storytelling often involves a reshaping to “fit the expectations of the interactional moment” (Wong, 2018, p. 249). PNT participants may seek to portray certain aspects of their stories to me due to their outlook, the nature of the interviews, the interview setting, or the interviewer themselves. As well, the telling of the stories may change shape based

on my empathy, encouragement, interruption, or resistance, for example (Chase, 2003). This is a form of relationship negotiation alongside the process of data collection, including collaborating for follow-up interviews and member-checking. Clandinin and Huber (2010) insist that the narrative researcher must resist the temptation to analyze and interpret at a distance from participants. Due to the co-construction of meaning, Creswell suggests that this process produces change and learning for both parties involved. The co-constructed narratives provide a summary of participant experiences related to partnering with an INT based on the collaborative interchanges.

Because of this interrelationship inherent in the interpretation and shaping of data, the narrative researcher must consider their own positioning regarding the narratives. The contexts of the negotiated relationship between participant and researcher are acknowledged as part of data creation. The reflexive process is a method of monitoring interpretation and happened at all stages of data collection and analysis. This allowed me to produce mindful evidence about how information comes to be known, alongside what is known (Hertz, 1995). Moen (2006) points out that human knowledge is relative and that life experiences and background color, not just a telling, but also the hearing of a story.

Narrative research can help to justify social change through mobilizing others, and as is particularly relevant to this research, Victor (2009) posits that this may be for therapeutic purposes. Hoped for outcomes that may be generated from this research are that there could be increased tools for teaching and learning about those who are affected

most closely by narcissistic behavior, as well as the development of resources and interventions available to those who partner with INTs.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered a key instrument to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data collection for this research took place through identifying relevant participants, conducting interviews, and data interpretation by the researcher in collaboration with each participant. As Creswell and Creswell describe, this was a “sustained and intensive” (p. 183) process while involved with participants. Because of the interdependence of storytelling and interpretation between the participant and researcher, the vigor of the research rests on mutual interactions (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). In some ways, this means that the researcher is both a participant and an observer through the interpretation of data, however, the framework of this research, is that the researcher is cast primarily in the role of observer.

Because of the close interactions between researcher and participant, and the inherent nature of experience informing the shaping of worldview, it is important in qualitative research to protect the credibility of the research from bias. For this reason, I engaged in a reflexive examination of any personal pre or post-conceptions of the phenomenon, positionality, and moments of identification with the data or participants. I documented belief systems around relationships with INTs in advance of the interviews based on occasional counselling work with partners, including impressions of partners themselves. In addition, this was an ongoing inner conversation during engagement of the process of methodological decision making designed to examine how past experiences

may have shaped both directional choices and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Riessman, 2008). As patterns and themes emerged, this documented reflexive conversation as a researcher allowed for the evaluation of personal biases and impressions in relation to past experiences (Shenton, 2004). The process of pattern and theme-making were member-checked for accuracy of interpretation and intertwined mutually with the ongoing practice of reflexivity.

I work as a Registered Clinical Counsellor who has a client base that is often seeking intervention and support for relationship issues. What this means, is that based on this work, there have been multiple instances of clients relating their stories of partnering with INTs over the past decade. It was vital for this reason, that the process of reflexivity captures these past impressions, including that of relationships in general, derived from both professional practice and personal life. Any personal or professional information that affects data collection or interpretation was reported, including relevant reflections of impressions, reactions, and exchanges concerning such things as background characteristics of myself and participants, for instance.

While participants were engaged through flyers tacked in general areas and posted via Facebook advertising to the general public, some participants were recruited indirectly through advertising to fellow counsellors as well. Participants were only sought from outside the boundaries of professional practice and personal life and were previously unknown to me to ensure a lack of conflict. Procedures for this recruitment will be discussed later in this chapter. The interviews were conducted in-person one-on-one or via Zoom from a neutral setting that did not convey a power differential, or a

client-counsellor relationship, for example. The intent was to verbally frame the participant as the expert in their own lives and to establish some relationship building exchanges from the outset to offset any potential feelings of a power differential that may be derived from a researcher-participant interaction. There are no organizational conflicts.

Participants were compensated fairly for their time; however, the level of compensation did not exceed a reasonable amount that could breach boundaries which may be considered coercive. A monetary hourly value was established at \$25 for the first 60–90-minute interview and \$10 for a potential 30-minute follow-up. This information was included as part of the recruitment material and informed consent procedures, and it was made clear that participant time will be compensated regardless of how the participant chooses to contribute or should they choose to cease participation. This compensation was meant to offset any costs that participants may incur (such as time away from important tasks or transportation costs, for example), and as Groth (2013) expresses, compensation can demonstrate respect for the value of the individual's participation. Compensation took the form of cash and a participant thank you form was given at that time, including my contact information and after-care resource information, should that be necessary. Care was taken in the screening procedures that the participant pool did not include vulnerable individuals.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

This research made use of criterion-based, purposive sampling with elements of maximum variation to develop a context-rich and deep understanding of participants' experiences of partnering with an INT (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Snowball sampling was accepted, but not requested. According to Creswell (2013) and Polkinghorne (2005), in narrative research, all participants must have an information-rich story to relate about their lived experience of the phenomenon. The population of interest in this research includes adult individuals who have partnered with an INT in a committed relationship for longer than 1 year. All participants must have been at least 18 years old by the time this relationship occurred and have been out of the relationship for at least 6 months to avoid any current risk of crisis and to enable a full story chronology. Any demographic or cultural background, including gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, or religious beliefs, for example, did not exclude participation. However, vulnerable populations were not considered for this study, such as those involved with chronic relationship violence, addiction, or serious mental illness, for example in order to avoid retraumatization and to focus on partnerships with INTs who generally have noncriminal backgrounds.

Palinkas et al. point out that selection always involves judicious use of limited resources to maximize the information needed to answer the research question. In this sense, the current research could be described in an overarching fashion as criterion-based due to the requirement for having participated in a PNT-INT relationship, however,

there is a mix of two specific sub-sampling strategies at work used in conjunction. These include maximum variation sampling since the hope was to include participants from a variety of demographic backgrounds, including ages, genders, sexualities, socioeconomic positions, and cultures who may illuminate common central themes attached to partnering with an INT. The goal of this strategy was to capture the fundamentals of the shared experiences in a patterned approach as well as documenting rich and high-quality descriptions including the unique perspectives (Patton, 2002). The strength and significance of this form of research comes from deriving common themes from participant heterogeneity (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Polkinghorne (2005) also describes that not only are essential themes uncovered with this method, but that important variations also emerge. In addition, the strategy of purposeful criterion sampling occurred, in that within these diverse geographically and demographic areas, no inclusion preference was be given to any participant meeting the screening criteria, but rather taken in order of expression of interest. Shenton (2004) proposes that this method enables the researcher to draw a more representative group of participants when the potential pool of participants is quite large, as is the case of this current study. Palinkas et al. and Ravitch and Carl suggest that this method increases the credibility of the outcomes and can potentially reduce bias.

The research study recruitment posters were advertised in two ways. Recruitment posters were deliberately placed in a variety of demographically diverse public areas of a large North American city and the surrounding communities and advertised on Facebook (necessary due to COVID-19 restrictions). As well, a message went out to all Registered

Clinical Counsellors in the general area asking them to post recruitment posters on the wall of their offices via their registering body and Facebook (closed group). Counsellors were asked not to request participation from their clients directly to avoid any possibility of coercion or conflict.

Potential participants were asked to contact me directly through email should they wish to join in the research study. Participants were given more details about the research, and if they wished to continue, full informed consent procedures occurred. All potential participants were carefully screened for demographic information, vulnerability, and the criteria for meeting the threshold of partnering with an individual with narcissistic traits, as informed by the Super-Brief, Pathological Narcissism Inventory-Carer Version (SB-PNI-CV), the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI), the DSM 5 (APA, 2013), and a text about surviving a relationship with a narcissist by Dr. Durvasula (2015) based on research around narcissistic relationships. The PNI-16 is useful to determine a threshold for narcissism in a partner, while the SB-PNI-CV steps beyond this assessment to also capture the vulnerable dimension of narcissism. Durvasula speaks to the social exchange of a narcissistic relationship specifically and is a useful determinant of participant experience. The screening tool and demographics page carefully explains that not all participants who fill this information out meet the study criteria for interview participation.

Narrative analysis may require only one to two individual participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); however, a larger number of participants may be used to develop a “collective story” (Creswell, 2013, p. 157). Nevertheless, a larger sample base was

indicated for this research because the research question requires a deeper explanation of the lived phenomenon, rather than having a focus on any given individual's unique life story. This larger sampling base also allowed for both sampling sub-strategies of maximum variation and purposeful criterion sampling (Brannen, 2012). Conversely, it was important to ensure that substantial depth and richness can emerge in the stories from adequate time spent with each participant. In this case, saturation was considered to have occurred when there was the absence of the emergence of new major themes nor little insight to be gained for the existing themes regarding the experience of partnering with an INT by adding in new participants (Bryman, 2012; Polkinghorne, 2005; Saunders et al., 2018). Due to the varied demographics and based on insights gained from both phenomenology and grounded theory analysis experts, this meant a range of between 6-30 participants is appropriate (Adler & Adler, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Time and financial constraints out of necessity limited the numbers of participants, and Adler and Adler (2012) suggest that 12 is a good number of participants for researchers who are new to the experience of structuring and transcribing interviews. As well, as Becker (2012) posits, the correct number of participants will change from moment to moment as data emerges and observations and themes are supported. My intention was to conduct no less than 8 interviews, and to continue to recruit participants until no major unique themes emerge from the data regarding the experience of partnering with an INT, however, due to logistic constraints, and the nature of the intense focus of narrative analysis, it was unlikely that the participant pool would grow beyond 30 individuals.

Instrumentation

Following initial contact with potential participants, the informed consent document was included as the first page of the screening tool with an invitation to be in contact if there were any questions about myself, research, or consent materials. It was explained that not everyone will meet the study criteria for participation. A confidential link to the screening tool was sent through an encrypted survey site via email for participants to complete at their leisure as part of the screening process.

Following receipt of the consent documents and screening tool, a phone call was set up with potential participants to fully explain the purpose of the study, check for understanding of the informed consent documents, elaborate on the sequence of participation, to answer any questions participants may have, and to set up an interview if criteria were met. Participants were required to complete the participant screening guide to determine suitability for participation in this research based on preset criteria and exclusions established by me. Permission for this use of the SB-PNI-CV has been granted by Pincus et al. (2009) and the NPI-16 has been granted by Ames et al. (2006). The published assessments were crucial to establish a threshold for participants who have partnered with an individual exhibiting higher levels of narcissistic traits, as well as to capture both dimensions, grandiose and vulnerable. Durvasula (2015) has likewise given permission for use of her assessment of partner narcissism to be incorporated into the screening tool. The incorporation of specific questions from Durvasula is informed by the DSM 5 (APA, 2013). All three sources used for the screening tool are appropriately cited. Participants were made aware by informed consent procedures that the data contained in

the screening procedures may be used as a part of the study, however, should participants not continue through to the interviews, or choose to remove their participation at any time before completion, that this data will be securely deleted.

For those individuals who chose to participate in this research, and who met the criteria, the primary source of data is the face-to-face or Zoom interviews, conducted one-on-one. These interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience and were generally between sixty to ninety minutes in length at a neutral and confidential location (a local pay-by-the-hour boardroom) or online, depending on COVID-19 considerations or concerns. I created a semi structured interview format, relying heavily on answering the research question and sub-questions. These questions are exploratory in nature and designed to fill gaps in current literature. They have been developed with a view to illuminating the nature of the PNT-INT social exchange, and the PNTs' experiences of such. The interview guide for these sessions consisted of a gentle introduction to myself and the nature of the research, followed by open-ended questions. This guide was used across all initial interviews to ensure a framework of consistency between participant sessions. All sessions were voice recorded so that clear and accurate transcription could occur following each interview.

Participants were made aware via informed consent procedures that there may be a request for follow-up questions or interview from either myself or participant to clarify or expand understanding. Participants had the chance to request this additional unstructured contact, should they choose, following an opportunity to member-check a thematic summary of their own interview. This summary was emailed so that each

participant could ensure the accuracy of my representation of their data. In a few instances I emailed follow-up questions, however it was not necessary to request a follow-up interview. Some participants provided some additional detail of their own volition, at times quite extensively. It had been made clear to participants that they were under no obligation to oblige in follow-up. Member checking also occurred following this step.

Published Data Collection Instruments

An adapted Super-Brief, Pathological Narcissism Inventory- Carer Version (SB-PNI-CV) was used as part of the screening tool to determine participant eligibility for the study. Pincus et al. (2009) developed the PNI version, after which, the super brief version was developed and validated by Schoenleber et al. (2015). An adapted Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 was also used. This super-brief version was adapted and validated by Ames et al. (2006).

The screening tool made use of these assessments to ensure that there was a consistent standard for what can be considered a PNT-INT relationship. The use of these instruments is not intended to promote generalization of results. The assessment questions reflected PNT reality in that 'I' statements were adjusted to say, 'my partner'. Permission for this specific use and alteration has been granted by Dr. Aaron Pincus one of the original authors and creators of the PNI and SB-PNI, and by Dr. Daniel Ames, one of the creators of the super-brief version of the NPI. A similar adjusted version has been validated and used in this fashion by Day et al. (2019), representing the SB-PNI-CV. As Day et al. point out, the SB-PNI-CV was developed in conjunction with Dr. A. Pincus

and follows previously published methodology. Not only have previous standards supported the use of partner-reported assessments, but Kardum et al. (2022) have determined that the use of partner-reported versus first-hand assessments with the “Dark-Triad” personality types (inclusive of narcissism) were very accurate, showing equivalent or higher correlations than other personality assessments.

The PNI is considered the gold standard in determining subtype differences between grandiose and vulnerable pathological narcissism and offers a distinction to the long-term standard assessment, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979) for this reason. The use of the PNI has been further validated by multiple additional authors, including Jakšić et al. (2014), Morf et al. (2017), Thomas et al. (2012), and You et al. (2013). However, the NPI remains the evaluation that is most commonly used for research purposes to determine a threshold for sub-clinical narcissism and provides the advantage of an examination of the dimensional traits of narcissism. This assessment has been validated many times over the years, however, formal identification of entitlement, exploitativeness, and thusly ties into lack of empathy, make this assessment valuable when overlaid by the exploration of how a PNT might experience resultant behavior in a relationship due to these traits (Ames et al., 2006; Foster et al., 2016; Gentile et al., 2013; Wetzel et al., 2016). Both assessments have been validated and used in a variety of research-based and clinical populations in multiple countries and cultural contexts by the above authors, and many others, to determine sub-clinical narcissism rates and thresholds, including large city populations similar to the current population of study in North America.

Researcher Developed Instruments

Face to face or zoom based individual interviews was the primary form of data collection. The semi structured interview format contained main questions that were designed to reflect the research question and sub-questions, including the progression of the relationship over time, the PNT's self-view, potential changes over the course of the relationship, and meaning making in terms of the longevity of the relationship. These questions were developed based on literature which suggests that elements of a PNT-INT relationship shift dramatically in a negative way over time and that this shift can be bewildering for the PNT due to negative INT behaviors which may not have been present in the beginning, as well as the intermittent and lessening, but strategic application of wooing behaviors (Fatfouta et al., 2017; Lamkin, Lavner, & Shaffer, 2017; Lavner et al., 2016; Wurst et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2016). Questions also addressed these shifts in the relationship dynamic from the PNT perspective of self view, and how that changed in conjunction with behavioral changes of the INT over time (Day et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2014; Lamkin et al., 2015; Lamkin et al., 2017). As well, questions examined PNT attributions and cost-benefit decisions that led to the longevity of the relationship.

This match of the interview questions to answering the research question and sub-questions was the first step in establishing content validity as it is based in established literature around the phenomenon, as is recommended by Brod Tesler, and Christensen (2009) and Zamanzadeh et al. (2015). Secondly, these authors also emphasize the importance of establishing that any instrument is relevant and reflective not just to the subject matter at hand, but also to participants. For this reason, I established two expert

panels to review not only the content and alignment of the instrument, but the relevancy to potential participants. These review panels consisted of the dissertation committee, and an expert panel gathered from clinical professionals who actively work with PNT/INT clients. Using the interview data as the main source of data allows for the focus to be on the narratives of participants and allows previously unheard voices to be the primary drivers of the plot.

The screening tool was considered to be a secondary source of data, however, rather than having strong connections to the research questions, these data were used mainly to provide contextual information about the participants. As mentioned previously, the screening tool contained basic demographic information, questions regarding potential vulnerability (for instance, “Did the relationship ever have an event of physical violence, such as forcibly restraining, pushing, hitting, slapping or other forms, for example?”), and eligibility screening questions. Importantly, this tool was also designed to establish eligibility regarding a necessary common criterion for all participants, which is having been part of a PNT-INT dyad. This participant baseline was imperative for answering the research question. Because the screening tool was used as a secondary source of data, informed consent documents were given just prior to potential participant completion. It was made clear that all individuals completing the screening tool may not receive a request for an interview. In addition to the aforementioned SB-PNI-CV and NPI-16, some of the screening tool was based on the potential PNT experience of their relationships in a yes or no format and was adapted from a screening quiz established by Dr. Ramani Durvasula (2015) from her book directed at PNT

individuals (permission for this use has been granted). As with the interview questions script, a dual-panel review was formed to establish the second important characteristic of content validity like the interview questions.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants were recruited by me via a few methods, posting flyers regarding the study for the general public in local gathering places across a large North American city and outlying areas and a general Facebook ad, additionally through a request sent to counselling colleagues both through the local registering body and on an associated closed Facebook group to post a flyer in their waiting room or alternatively through email to clients if necessary due to social distancing protocols caused by COVID-19. Potential participants were asked to contact myself directly through email and will be dealing only with me. No other individuals were assisting in recruitment or data collection, and any researcher conflict personally or professionally in terms of prior connection to participants was examined for exclusion. None were found. Flyers were posted until enough data collection had occurred to exhaust themes that profoundly answer the research question and a deeper understanding of participant experience had transpired (Charmaz, 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). New rounds of flyers were not needed. Participant selection was expanded to other public locations as well as a larger geographical area.

The two main data collection instruments are the face-to-face participant interviews and the screening tool, when the in-person format was allowed and advisable based on COVID-19 restrictions. Interviews were conducted at a neutral setting in a pay-

by-the-hour boardroom or alternatively through the Zoom meeting platform at the participants' convenience. The semi structured interviews were designed to answer the research question, while the screening tool established participant threshold characteristics necessary to answer the research question, as well as to provide some contextual information about participants. Interviews were recorded digitally, and the screening tool will be transmitted electronically. These were all available for review by the dissertation committee to help ensure the accuracy of the analysis. An interview guide was used to establish consistency across participant interviews and mainly open-ended questions, follow-ups, and prompts were used to encourage a natural flow of participant stories (Anderson & Kirkpartick, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Interviews were carefully transcribed to ensure accuracy and for deep immersion into the data (Lynn & Crawford, 2016). Please see the Published Data Collection and Researcher Developed Instruments sections for more information.

Participants had access to interpreted summaries of their data on at least one and possibly two occasions. The first member check took place after the initial interview, at which point the interviewer may have requested a phone call for follow up questions (preferably), or an in-person follow-up interview if the told story does not fully illuminate the answer to the research question and sub-questions (which did not occur). Participants were invited to email responses should they feel that they have more to add, review, or clarify from the initial interview, or to improve the accuracy of my interpretation. In addition, if a follow-up interview occurs would have occurred, participants would have an opportunity to review an amalgamated summary of their own data for similar member

checking. Clandinin and Huber (2010) suggest that repeated interviewing and member checking helps to develop a “more complex account of participant experience” (p. 12). However, it was made clear to participants via the informed consent documents and verbally post-initial interview that they are under no obligation to continue such participation. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to protect identity and anonymity.

While it is not anticipated that the telling of these stories would elicit deeply traumatizing information, participants were provided with my contact information after each interview session should they have any questions or concerns, as well as the link to the local counselling association should the need arise based on the retelling of potentially sensitive information. This information was included within the initial consent forms. Participants will be provided with \$25 in compensation of their time spent for the initial 60–90-minute interview, and \$10 for a follow-up interview, a shorter duration of 30 minutes maximum. Study outcomes will be summarized in a one to two-page report once the dissertation has been approved and sent to participants so that they may see the end results, should they wish.

Data Analysis Plan

The primary source of data, that of the participant interviews, was analyzed for experiences relating to the span of partnering with an INT, with special attention paid to self-views over the duration of the relationship and any attributions of longevity. The research question and each of the sub-questions rely directly on the stories of participant experiences as narrated by themselves. Demographic data collected in the screening tool

relates specifically to participant context and helps to inform and lay contextual groundwork for the research sub-question concerning self-view.

This inquiry was conducted via thematic narrative analysis in that the content (as opposed to how things are said), is the sole focus of this study (Etherington, 2013; Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2016). Thematic analysis is a broad model of identifying and analyzing patterns, applicable to examining qualitative data, including through the framework of narrative analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The time and place in each relationship for positioning the sequencing of the stories was of vital importance to this analysis process. While the chronological stories of each individual were kept intact, themes were cross compared among participants, hence the use of more than one participant. As Riessman suggests, data is interpreted based on the themes which emerge in the telling of the stories. Codes and themes were based on content analysis with a foundation in the social exchange of the relationship, particularly as it concerned participant investment and overall emotional state.

The coding manual developed by Saldaña (2016) was used as a guide for coding the data, combined with coding recommendations summarized by Creswell and Creswell (2018). A priori codes were not developed during this process to be more open to participant experiences and due to the INT-centric nature of the existing research, however, a list of broad themes derived from the research was created as a mindfulness exercise to potentially compare when codes ultimately emerged from the data. No computer program was used during the coding process to help promote deeper immersion in the data for myself through hand-coding. Transcription, sequence formulation through

chunking data based on chronology (categorical-content perspective described by Hiles & Cermák, 2008), coding lists, and matrixes were relied on for data organization.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis were used as a support framework to guide the narrative structure of the examination of the data, with more detailed elements adhered to at each phase, as suggested by other authors. Clarke and Braun (2013) state that this model is appropriate as a basic method, including for research questions that help in relaying "people's experiences or understandings" (p. 120) and works well with transcribed interview data. The six phases of this recursive model include (Clarke & Braun, p. 121):

1. Familiarization with the data- immersion, transcribing, and note taking
2. Coding- capturing semantics and conceptualization of the data, collating, and extracting relevant data
3. Searching for themes- coherent, meaningful patterns relevant to the research question
4. Reviewing themes- reflecting on the accuracy of codes and themes in relations to the data set and story, and the relationships between themes
5. Defining and naming themes- writing a detailed analysis of each theme
6. Writing up- weaving together the analytic narrative into a coherent and persuasive story

Initially, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), Josselson (2011), Kim (2016), and Smith (2016) each transcribed interview was printed and reviewed for a broad understanding of what participants have experienced and the meaning that they

were attempting to impart. Notes were taken in the margin along the way. Initial coding took place after this process with as much openness to alternative perceptions as possible, including a view to the literature discussed in Chapter Two as well as the important events of the narrative and its chronology. Relevant text (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) was derived from narratives that illuminated answers to the research question, including participant experiences, chronology, self-view, and longevity of the relationship.

Coding notes were listed on a paper transcript in the margins as well as in a coding notebook (Chase, 2003). As was expected, an eclectic combination of coding strategies was employed to ensure that data were not reduced beyond an appropriate distillation, as explained by Saldaña (2016) including descriptive, in vivo, process, emotion, values, narrative, analysis, causation, and concept coding.

Once this open coding had occurred, the data and initial codes were examined for similarities and differences that lent themselves to themes and patterns (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Initially, this took the form of a code list that could help to generate categories. Codes, categories, and themes were analyzed within each participant data set, as well as across data sets.

As suggested by Saldaña, codes, subcodes, and categories were organized into a hierarchical tree around main themes and reclassified or relabeled with subsequent readings when appropriate. This development was aided by employing a coding matrix and concept maps. Coding methods in this stage included pattern and focused coding, followed by an axial coding procedure.

During the analytic process, reflexive and analytic memos were written periodically to reflect on my relationship and response to the data, choices in coding and structure, the connection of the data to the social relationships, links between themes and patterns, and other issues that emerged, as detailed by Saldaña (2016).

A special search for discrepant cases or information occurred and were considered a welcome inclusion into the data. This information sometimes represented either the need for additional data collection or alternatively, was suggestive of the possibility of diverse contextual background or experiences. When data did not match other views and attitudes, it was helpful for refining findings that required additional examination (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As Booth et al. (2013) state, a deeper and richer account of participant stories is possible once alternative perspectives for the data are considered. In essence, discrepant cases help to challenge researcher assumptions and biases and can promote more complex conceptualizations of the phenomenon (McPherson & Thorne, 2006; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). It is thus that the themes can be inductively refined and subsequently strengthen the credibility of findings. Morse (2015) and Patton (2002) point out a critical factor of discrepant cases in that they can help to illuminate the norms of the most commonly occurring data through analyzing the contrasting information and each contribution to the whole. In addition, careful analysis of discrepant cases and the exploration of alternate explanations involve the self-examination of potential researcher biases (Patton, 2002).

When discrepant data occurred, participants were consulted for follow-up questions determine the source or reasons for discrepancies and prompted the recruitment of additional participants to ensure exhaustion of relevant themes.

The results of this data analysis will be presented in Chapter 4.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Demonstrating the credibility of this research occurred by providing a clear link between the realities of partnering with an INT and the ultimate findings. To this end, multiple strategies were employed based on recommended methodology from qualitative research experts. Care was taken through the explanation and use of triangulation, negative case analysis, prolonged engagement, member checking, saturation considerations, reflexivity, my qualifications, and peer and expert debriefing.

Patton (2002) describes triangulation in a variety of ways, however, the key method of triangulation that was employed in this research was to examine the consistency within several data sources using similar methods. Narratives were derived from a group of participants who were interviewed using the same semi structured interview guide based on the research question and sub-questions. Data were then cross-analyzed for patterns and commonalities of experience, as well as differences to develop justifiable final themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2005). Shenton (2004) encourages the use of a diversity of participants, which I endeavored to do, and ultimately these viewpoints that were “verified” against one another serve to contribute to a “rich picture of the attitudes, needs, and behaviors” (p. 66) of the participants and

phenomenon. In addition, data were compared to existing research for any evidence that served to corroborate or counter findings. To help avoid predisposed assumptions and biases, negative or discrepant case analysis took place, as is described in the data analysis plan.

In terms of prolonged engagement with participants, there was multiple email and phone contacts with participants prior to the first interview, partially to develop trust and comfort with myself and the process of the research. As Brod Tesler, and Christensen (2009) and Zamanzadeh et al. (2015) explain, direct communication is a cornerstone to collecting credible data from participants. When there is researcher-participant rapport, participants may have increased trust and become more comfortable in disclosing information (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Morse, 2015; Shenton, 2004). Expectations of this process were explored from both participant and my perspective, and checks for understanding and consent occurred at each stage of participation. Participants were made aware that they may leave the research process at any time, to ensure that they were involving themselves freely and openly and that they could proceed with honesty. With prolonged engagement, I was able to develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and the individuals involved in the narratives, thus increasing credibility for the process of data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, Morse, 2015).

Shenton (2004) discusses that member checking could be considered the most important factor in building research credibility. Participants had at least one opportunity to provide feedback on data and my analysis should they choose, including access to a summary of their own data in interpretive form (based on codes and themes) so that they

could check for “accuracy, completeness, fairness, and perceived validity” (Patton, 2002, p. 560). Through member checking, the research becomes more of a collaboration with participants by embedding their perspective into the research in a formal way, thus increasing validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Emden, 1998). This process also occurred a second time with follow-up questions, extra input, or participant commentary from the initial interpretation. In addition, Shenton recommends spot-checking for data accuracy throughout the interview process, which occurred during each participant contact.

Fusch and Ness (2015) have determined that appropriate saturation must transpire to reach content validity within qualitative research. These authors provide three important criteria for saturation, including obtaining enough information and data to replicate the study, when avenues for new data have been fully explored, and when the possibility for additional coding has been exhausted. Polkinghorne (2005) summarizes these concepts by suggesting that the saturation point is the moment when there are no longer significant contributions to be made to the data by further collection. These three criteria were adhered to during the data collection and analysis stages of this research. As Morse states, “if the sample is too small, data are not saturated, the results obtained are superficial and obvious, and cherry picking” (Morse, 2015, p. 22).

An ongoing reflexive process ensued to examine how I responded to the information, data collection and analysis, and how my background, assumptions, biases, and preconceived notions played a role in these processes and stages. When these items are clarified throughout the study process for both the researcher and reader, it is then possible to determine the impact upon the study and the findings (Creswell, 2013), thus is

a factor in determining credibility. Short of this, there may be a danger to credibility if the researcher is only attending to that which is expected (Morse, 2015). Please see the Confirmability section for additional information.

Shenton (2002) considers that an important component in creating credibility of research lies with the qualifications of the researcher. I have been trained as a Registered Clinical Counsellor at a master's degree level and have been practicing in the field clinically for over a decade, in private practice, crisis support, and at a supervisory level. Due to this education level, theoretical and some practical experience was gained regarding research processes. In addition, the clinical experience is of utmost importance as it relates to this current research. Conducting an interview is something that is practiced with each client in an informal way, as is building rapport and trust so that an individual may feel comfortable in sharing more sensitive information in an open and honest fashion. Pattern recognition occurs in each client session, and it is of paramount importance to client service that the most salient points of data are capitalized upon in sessions. Much of my clientele are either couples seeking strategies for relationships or individuals doing likewise. At times, this clientele occasionally includes partners of individuals who seemingly exhibit narcissistic traits, and very rarely an individual who themselves may exhibit these traits. Over time and through familiarity, strategies have been developed for increasing client confidence in exploring these issues, which has also impacted the study design and existing-research examination.

The peer and expert review process took place through the natural evolution of the dissertation progression, including a chair and committee person who asked questions

about content and methodology, as well as other processes that result in the findings. In addition, the University reviewer and IRB board provided another layer of scrutiny from an even more objective and external direction. Walden University's approval number for this study was 08-19-20-0539520 and it expired on August 18th, 2021. These two layers are most recommended for achieving credibility by Creswell and Creswell (2018) within the peer-review process. Alternative approaches and identifiable flaws could potentially be uncovered by individuals who possess more detachment from the subject (Shenton, 2002). Peer review will also help to prevent bias (Morse, 2015) and has allowed me to amend the research product so that the implications of each design and implementation choices are challenged for improvement (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and are clearly laid out for the reader. Morse also points out that it is through these reviews that pattern recognition can be improved through outside examinations reflected back to researchers, and through the researcher vocalizing their own choices and understanding. Parsing apart the researcher's process and justifications that lead to the ultimate findings serve to enhance overall credibility (Morse, 2015).

Transferability

Creswell and Creswell (2018) caution that the use of the term transferability in qualitative research is not to denote the idea of generalization across any other population formats, other than the ones under study. However, with extensive and quality documentation that allows the study conditions to be replicated, the reader may be able to determine parallels for similar conditions in other areas. As Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) discuss, the theoretical constructs examined in the research will serve to help

further understanding of the experiences of a new sample. This research includes rich and thick descriptions that contains not only contextual descriptions, but process descriptions, including alternative perspectives, that allows the reader to evaluate my methodologies and choices for interpretation of findings (Suter, 2012). This includes identifying the fit between the raw data and the emerging analysis (Morrow, 2005). Creswell and Miller (2000) have determined that the depth of the description rests inherently on the reader experience of the “verisimilitude” (p. 129) of the depiction of participant experience, including actions, interactions, settings and culture, and feelings (Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2003). Also, with a clearly described sample and population, the reader can then decide whether the findings could be transferable to another population and how far this transfer is possible based on similarities in context (Moen, 2006; Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2003).

In addition, Patton (2002) argues that purposeful sampling with a small number of cases that are deeply information-laden will have larger applicability outside of the sample group. This research revolves around a combined strategy of purposeful criterion sampling and a version of maximum variation sampling in which participants were sought through mindful advertising in a variety of geographical areas with heterogenic cultural, socioeconomic, lifestyle, and urban/suburban variations. Participants were filtered based on meeting specific criteria which match having a former long-term INT partner, however, they were not chosen based on a specific set of experiences with INT partners, rather, in the order in which they made contact with me. Transferability is enhanced when findings are consistent across a variety of study contexts (participants,

settings, times etc...) as this demonstrates that these variations are “conceptually irrelevant” (Patton, 2002, p. 581).

Dependability

The dependability of qualitative research rests on consistent procedural approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Brod, Tesler, and Christensen (2009) explain this as the “collection and analysis of the information being systematic, documentable, and qualitatively accurate” (p. 1263). The procedural steps and protocols have been carefully recorded so that a reader could attempt to replicate the study, and to demonstrate the reliability of findings (Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004). This audit trail was made available for multiple levels of oversight, including by my chairperson and committee member. The research design has been carefully detailed as well as to show how it was applied to data collection and analysis, participant recruitment, the interview preparation and process, and justifications for various directional choices. Ongoing, chronological, and systematic documentation tracked the identification of emerging information or unexpected changes in meaning and understanding through both the coding process and fit of the social exchange theories (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Morrow, 2005; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For example, continual journaling and memoing allowed me to keep track of the procedural steps, responses to the information and data, “reflective appraisal” (Shenton, 2005, p. 72), and rationale for the emerging findings. Suter (2012) emphasizes that the audit trail is of utmost importance to allow the reader to evaluate and develop trust in the findings.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest some additional strategies which were employed to ensure dependability. For instance, participant transcripts were double-checked against the audio for any potential mistakes in transcription. As well, a codebook was kept with memos regarding the meaning of each of the codes, and this was regularly checked to ensure ongoing consistency as time went on, and to prevent against sliding meanings. Expert/peer auditing also helped to maintain appropriate code-recode consistency.

Confirmability

A major piece to the confirmability of qualitative research is contained with the researcher's ability to examine and control their own biases. As Morrow (2005) states, the researcher is never truly objective, thus nor is the research product. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that it is the process of reflexivity which clarifies how researcher interpretations are formed and that the ability to be "open and honest" with the reader will allow the material to "resonate" (p. 200). This includes how the researcher's own demographic context plays a role in these interpretations, values, as well as other social influences (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Patnaik, 2013). Once biases are acknowledged and clear, the reader can confirm or disconfirm the adequacy of the researcher's management of bias as it leads to findings via the aforementioned audit trail (see the Credibility and Dependability sections).

The participants' voices must be the dominant force behind the compendium of the findings, derived primarily from the perspective of their experiences and narration rather than researcher subjectivity (Morse, 2015; Shenton, 2004). This requires a high

level of openness to participant interpretation and alertness to “unexpected and unusual” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 482) responses. Beyond demographic, values, and social information, Creswell and Creswell (2018) also add that the researcher should include links to experiences with the research problem, participants, or setting and to discuss how this informs possible interpretations during the course of the study. This might include historical information as well as current connections. My intention was to see beyond what might be anticipated, by acknowledging and addressing any preconceived and evolving notions around the subject matter through the use of reflexive journaling and memoing and maintaining ongoing dialogue with peers/experts and as Morse suggests, to examine the interview questions and any participant materials for any guided biases. This examination was connected to my context and experience both past and present and how this may have informed research choices and interpretation.

Ethical Procedures

Access and Permissions

This research was submitted via application to Walden University’s Institutional Review Board for approval to conduct this study prior to any gathering of data or contact with participants. The basis of this research was in-person or zoom-based interviews with participants. Participants were drawn from two places, including a flyer sent to counsellors to distribute via email or posted in counselling office waiting rooms and flyers posted in areas accessible to the general public, including Facebook. This required two sets of permissions to access interviews, from the participants themselves and/or from counsellor peers to post. All participants were required to be nonvulnerable

individuals over the age of 18 who had partnered long-term with an INT as per the screening assessment. No participant was excluded based on demographic criteria, such as gender, sexuality, race or culture, religion, nor that of their former partners.

Participation in this study was strictly voluntary as was explained in the informed consent procedures. Participants were given the informed consent form immediately following initial contact and after written or verbal agreement to possibly participate had been offered. I confirmed through the form and follow-up that participants understood the nature of the study, its purpose, time expectations, the statement of confidentiality, any risks and benefits anticipated, and that they provided consent to have interviews digitally recorded. This form made clear that participants could leave the study at any time, refuse to answer any questions, or could withdraw the entirety of their data without penalty. Participants were also made aware that they could have the ability to review summaries of their interpreted data to check for accuracy and fullness of meaning. Information to connect participants to local area counsellors or the crisis line was included should they wish to access these services during the progress of the study.

A request was sent to counsellors in Greater Vancouver and the surrounding geographical areas via the counselling registration body of the BC Association for Clinical Counsellors, to post recruitment flyers in their waiting rooms or email to clients, should they choose. This request not only outlined the nature and purpose of the study, as well as inclusion criteria, but it made clear that participation in this research is strictly voluntary and that any interest in, or questions about the study must be redirected back to me to prevent against any perceived second-hand coercion.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

Participants were made aware through the informed consent form that their data is kept confidential and that it will only be used for the purposes of this research and any subsequent publication. Data were carefully screened for any personally identifying features, which were not included in the summaries or final product. All participants were given or chose a pseudonym after the screening and informed consent process, with one master list and consent forms kept in a locked filing cabinet separate from the interview data and other participant or researcher-based products. These data-based documents were all labelled with the pseudonym only. Interview recordings, transcriptions, and researcher products are both hard-copy and/or electronic and are contained either in a locked filing cabinet, external hard drive kept in a locked file cabinet (backup for data), or on a password-protected laptop residing in a locked office used by me only. Participants have been made aware that their data will be kept for a period of five years in a locked file cabinet before being shredded or fully deleted.

Summary

Thematic narrative analysis was determined to be the most appropriate methodology based on the research question. The experiential stories of relationships follow a natural chronological pathway and rely heavily on the turning points that are presented in conjunction with the social exchanges within the dyad. For this reason, it is the content of the narratives that was examined, as opposed to analyzing literary devices used in the telling. For the research question to be sufficiently answered, participants met a baseline set of criteria to establish that they had a set of experiences that inform the

reader about long-term partnering with an INT. The goal was to not only use this form of purposive sampling, but also to seek participants from diverse sociocultural geographical areas towards a goal of variation. In-person or zoom-based semi structured interviews provided the primary source of data, however, demographic information and interview responses helped to situate each narrative contextually, as well as aided in cross-comparison between participant narratives. Various strategies were employed throughout the research process to maintain consistent trustworthiness of the findings and were based on the developed descriptions of the design and methodologies so that the reader could satisfactorily replicate research conditions.

Chapter 4: Results

The intent of this study was to explore how PNTs describe the engagement, duration, and termination of their relationships with INTs. Changes in the PNTs' self-views were documented to describe the full course of the relationship trajectory, as well as attributions made which might explain the endurance of the connection. The 29 interviews gathered in this narrative research tell the story of a unique and often covert form of emotional abuse that can exist in some relationships, the strength and resilience of the people who endure it, and a picture of the subsequent recovery process. This chapter describes the demographic details of participants and their former partners, which aimed at establishing a sense of context for the interview data. The data collection process including evidence of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability features are presented for the reader to evaluate and potentially replicate procedures. Thematic coding was used for data analysis, resulting in five themes, 18 main codes, and 127 subcodes explaining participant experience. The results demonstrate a relatively collective set of experiences during the chronological trajectory unique to the PNT-INT dyad and the PNT recovery process post-separation.

Demographics

To participate in this study, all volunteers must have been 18+ and must have ended a long-term relationship with a partner who exhibited elevated narcissistic characteristics, no less than 6 months prior to interview. Excepting vulnerable populations, no other limitations were put on demographics in the recruitment phase, including that of gender or sex, sexuality, socioeconomic status, or race. Flyers were

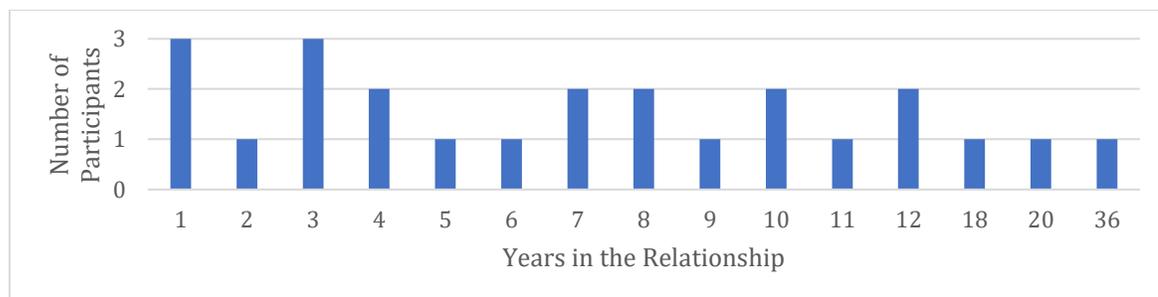
posted in a wide variety of demographically different public areas of a large North American city and surrounding areas and sent out to mental health professionals via their registering body or closed Facebook groups. Participants were included in order of expressed interest and qualification (via screening). Irrespective of the lack of limitations on demographics, there was some homogeneity in certain categories. 29 participants were recruited for the study, 27 of whom identified as female, two as male. All couples had opposite-gendered former partners. Generally, most participants had access to higher education and eventually stable employment. Other demographic categories contained more heterogeneity. At the beginning of each relationship, the participants' ages ranged from 17- 46, with a mean age of 27.2, median age of 26, mode of age 21, $SD = 2.4$. 19 participants had been married to their partners, five cohabitated, and five were committed but living apart. Of special note, six of the participants were mental health professionals who had been sent the flyer to post in their waiting rooms, however, met the study criteria themselves and chose to volunteer. The major participant demographics of the study are listed below in Table 1, and Figures 1 and 2.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

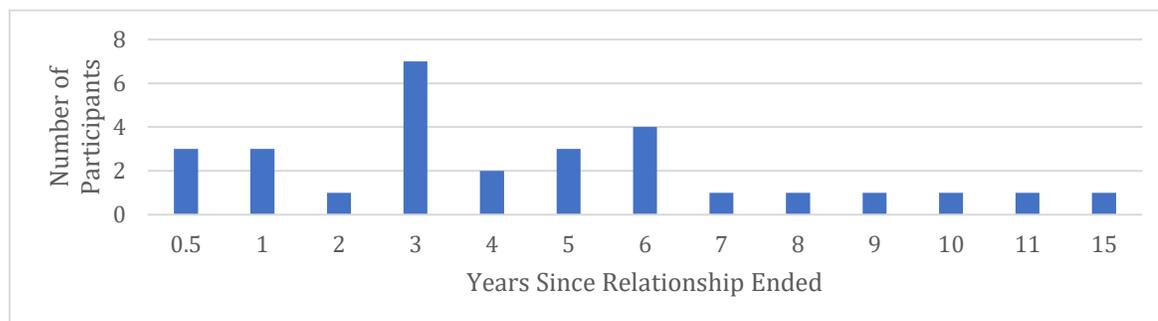
P	Gender	Age*	Ethnicity	Education (Degree)	Employment	Kids	Year Began	End
Madeline	Female	30	Asian	Undergraduate	Public Service	0	2012	2015
Robin	Female	23	White	Graduate	Mental Health	0	2014	2018
Kyla	Female	21	White	College	Self-Employed	1	2009	2017
Mia	Female	26	White	Graduate	Professional	1	2007	2017
Claire	Female	21	Hispanic	Graduate	Mental Health	0	2007	2017
Megan	Female	21	White	Undergraduate	Student	0	2013	2015
Dawn	Female	38	White	Undergraduate	Medical Sales	1	2005	2010
Valerie	Female	24	Asian	College	Self-Employed	0	2011	2013
Ani	Female	21	White	Undergraduate	Self-Employed	1	2000	2010
Ava	Female	21	E. European	College	Skilled Trade	2	2006	2017
Sophia	Female	28	Asian	Undergraduate	Sales	1	1999	2016
Dustin	Male	32	South Asian	Undergraduate	Unemployed	1	2019	2020
Jessica	Female	35	White	Undergraduate	Health Care	0	2012	2015
Eleanor	Female	26	White	Graduate	Mental Health	3	1998	2017
Cecilia	Female	24	White	College	Government	1	1995	2016
Nancy	Female	17	White	Highschool	Self-Employed	2	1998	2017
Ruby	Female	45	White	Graduate	Mental Health	0	2001	2014
Una	Female	30	White	Graduate	Health Care	0	2009	2017
Wendy	Female	22	White	Undergraduate	Education	0	2018	2019
Brooke	Female	34	White	Undergraduate	Medical Sales	0	2008	2009
Diana	Female	22	White	College	Culinary	0	2010	2014
Rita	Female	37	White	Graduate	Mental Health	0	2004	2001

P	Gender	Age*	Ethnicity	Education (Degree)	Employment	Kids	Year Began	End
Morgan	Female	19	South Asian	Undergraduate	Financial Analyst	0	2014	2019
Elise	Female	38	White	Graduate	Marketing	1	2002	2020
Tara	Female	17	White	Graduate	Mental Health	3	1969	2005
Mona	Female	22	White	Undergraduate	Management	2	2009	2020
Dorian	Male	38	White	Trade School	Firefighter	2	2014	2019
Vanessa	Female	26	White	Graduate	Sports Consultant	1	1996	2013
Iris	Female	31	Eurasian	Graduate	Teaching	2	2009	2014

Note. Age range is current at the time of the relationship starting. Kids category represents the number of children produced within the PNT-INT dyad. Year began and end categories refer to the years of the relationship in question. Participants spent anywhere from 1 to 36 years in a relationship with their INT partner, however most participants spent less than 10 years with their partner. No relationship occurred more than 15 years ago, with most occurring within the past 6 years to the time of interview.

Figure 1*Number of Years in the Relationship*

Note. Years not listed equal zero participants. Half years are rounded up to the nearest year.

Figure 2*Years Since the Relationship Ended (*at the time of interview)*

Note. Years not listed equal zero participants.

A few potential participants chose not to complete either the initial screening process or to move through to the interview. As well, some did not meet the criteria for inclusion, and thus any collected data for these individuals has not been included. Rationale for non inclusion is included in Table 2, either by choice or by parameters of the research.

Table 2*Rationale for Non Inclusion*

	Participant Non-Follow Through	Still in Relationship	INT didn't meet NPI/PNI cut-off score	Chronic or Serious Partner Violence
Gender				
Female	4	1	1	1
Male	2	0	0	1
Totals	6	1	1	2

Note. Participant non follow-through reflects participants who reached out, but who either chose not to continue through the screening process or to conduct an interview. INT partner scores on the NPI and PNI were based on PNT report.

INT Demographic Information

Limited demographic information was collected about the INTs to determine any possible surface trends. Of note, most partners were identified as male, with two exceptions out of the 29, and 16 of the INTs were older than their partners by 5 years or more (2 of them were older by more than 10 years). The two female INTs were younger than the male participants in their dyad. INT Demographic information is presented in table 3.

Table 3*INT Demographics*

INT	Current Age*	Ethnicity	Education	Employment	Year Began
1	41-45	Portuguese/ Jewish	Graduate	Mental Health	2012
2	31-35	White	College	Actor/ Unemployed	2014
3	31-35	White	Highschool	Trade	2009
4	36-40	Asian	Undergraduate	Professional	2007
5	41-45	White	Highschool	Entrepreneur	2007
6	26-30	White	Highschool	Self-Employed	2013
7	46-50	White	College	Unemployed	2005
8	36-40	Asian	Undergraduate	Self-Employed	2011
9	31-35	Caribbean	Undergraduate	Unemployed	2000
10	51-55	Caribbean	Trade	Professional	2006
11	36-40	Middle Eastern	Undergraduate	Professional	1999
12	26-30	South Asian	Undergraduate	Unemployed	2019
13	41-45	White	Graduate	Professional	2012
14	51-55	White	Graduate	Professor	1998
15	51-55	White	Highschool	Trade	1995
16	36-40	White	Trade	Trade	1998
17	65+	White	Undergraduate	Self-Employed	2001
18	41-45	White	Graduate	Entrepreneur	2009
19	18-25	White	Highschool	Student	2018
20	41-45	Portuguese- N. American	Undergraduate	Sales	2008
21	31-35	White	Highschool	DJ/ Promoter	2010

INT	Current Age*	Ethnicity	Education	Employment	Year Began
22	36-40	White	Graduate	Professional	2004
23	26-30	South Asian	Undergraduate	Professional	2014
24	51-55	White	Graduate	Professional	2002
25	65+	White- Jewish	Graduate	Healthcare	1969
26	31-25	White	College	Skilled trade	2009
27	36-40	White	Highschool	Administrator	2014
28	46-50	White	Graduate	Pro Athlete/ Sales	1996
29	51-55	White	Highschool	Professional	2009

Note. Age range is current at the time of interview. Year began category refers to the relationship in question.

*One INT partner is deceased- current age is representative of what age they would have been.

Data Collection

29 participants qualified via the screening process and went on to do an interview. Initially, interviews took place face-to-face at a neutral location, however, as COVID-19 restrictions were put into place, interviews were performed exclusively via the Zoom platform. Interviews were from September 14, 2020, to February 16, 2021.

Interview locations ranged from pay-by-the-hour boardrooms to hotel conference rooms at a mutually agreed upon geographical area in or near a large North American city. Interviews were audio recorded simultaneously with two recording devices to ensure backup in case of technology failure. Interviewer notes responding to content were hand-written during the interviews and reflexive notes were also hand-written immediately following each interview. Each interview followed the semi structured Interview Guide (see Appendix A) using open-ended questions, however, I left as much space as possible for participants to tell their story in their own way. This meant that some questions were not asked in order or did not need to be asked since the interviewee may have already spoken about these details. Often, stories were not told in chronological order as memories occurred in response to various prompts and triggers. Additional probes were used to clarify or to add richness and depth to events described.

In general, interviews were 60-90 minutes in length, however, a few of the participants chose to spend more time telling their stories after I let them know that the interviews were reaching the hour-and-a-half mark. 29 participants were included in the study. 28 participants consented to and engaged in only one interview, and an additional individual also requested a follow-up interview to add further detail. 10 of the

participants chose to provide email addendums to their stories which were likewise included in the coding process. I reached out to seven participants to clarify minor demographic information via email.

Most potential participants responded to flyers physically posted around their community or alternatively through viewing flyers posted in counsellors' waiting rooms. Three of the participants reached out because of snowball sampling, information about the study passed along by participants to other individuals of their own volition (not through my request). Volunteers contacted me via the Walden University email address listed on the flyers and were sent a unique link to the consent and qualifying screening tool with instructions and details about (optional) ongoing participation expectations. Potential participants were either given or chose a nonidentifying pseudonym to use on the screening tool and for the subsequent interview. All other names have been changed within the transcripts. For those participants who chose to complete the screening tool, I reached out via phone call to discuss qualification status, and if qualified, to review participation details, answer any questions, and to set up a date, time, and place for the interview. Zoom links were sent to those participants for whom the interviews were remote. A thank you email and compensation were sent to each participant.

Following the interview, participants had the opportunity to review their verbatim transcription and a two-to-five-page summary written by me to member check for accuracy and understanding. Participants were invited to respond if they wished to change details, add to the script, and/or to confirm accuracy. Most participants confirmed receipt and/or accuracy, however, two chose not to respond. One participant asked for a

word change and to remove potentially identifying details, which were subsequently redacted from the coded version of the transcript and will not be used in published data. As a result of this member-checking process some of the additional participant addendums were included, however, no other participants expressed any need for rereview of content or accuracy. A condensed set of summaries is provided in Appendix B for contextual information about participants. The data collection methods were consistent with those delineated in Chapter 3.

A one to two-page summary will be sent to all participants, as well as the final outcomes as a follow up. Most of the volunteers who did not qualify have also requested a copy of the outcomes, and it will likewise be provided to them.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was performed as described in Chapter 3. Upon transcription of each interview, the copy was reviewed for accuracy by me and sent to the interviewed participant who then had an opportunity to make comments or changes. No changes to the transcripts were requested.

Due to the unexplored nature of partnering with an INT, qualitative methodology was suitable to capture the larger picture of such relationships from the perspective of the partner. The story of a relationship contains a natural arc that lends itself well to narrative framework in terms of a chronological organizational structure.

As each transcript was completed, it was read at least once by myself and then summarized for member checking. After approval or changes, each transcript was then hand coded in a first open pass using thematic analysis, with a view to the social

exchange involved within the relationship and the resultant consequences of the experience for the PNT as they relate it. The focus of coding was on the content and meaning behind what each participant was relaying in their story (Reissman, 2008). Initial impressions were listed in the margin and recorded in a codebook for each transcript, as well as a general coding matrix to help cross-compare transcripts later. The coding matrix and definitions evolved with each new transcript. From this, it became clear that the most evocative way to group codes hierarchically was through the chronology of the relationship, based on the macro commonalities that existed between participants and the distinct trajectories and turning points of their stories. Interviews were ongoing during the initial stages of this process which allowed for continued identification of new or confirmed concepts along the way. Transcripts were reread and recoded at least three more times, with evolutions in deeper understanding recorded.

Conceptual groupings began to inductively take shape from the data (Reissman, 2008) as it was processed with each subsequent reading of the transcripts, and general themes began to emerge with cross-comparison. Certain codes were regrouped, absorbed, or eliminated during this process. The hierarchical structure for all codes was storyboarded on a bulletin board for ease of grouping into categories, and to preserve the chronology of the stories' events. Each coded transcript was then digitally replicated for Chair review, which allowed for a refined pass over completed code books and coding matrix. Please see Appendix C for the Code List and Definitions.

Codes were derived from participant language and direct or indirect content of meaning, moving from descriptive, narrative, causation, emotions, and values coding to

eclectic coding, pattern, focused, and axial coding in subsequent passes, with a view to the values and costs of dyadic interactions (Homans, 1958). In later-stage reviews, recoding happened from the lens of participant experience as opposed to descriptions of INT actions (ex: Incentivized versus Used Incentives). Table 4 and Table 5 show the five themes, codes, and subcodes. See Hierarchical Charts in Appendix D.

Table 4

Results of Thematic Analysis: Main Codes Organized by Theme

Foundations	Below the Surface	Roller Coaster	Recovery & Leaving	Hindsight
Self-View Pre	Instincts	Devolution	Self-View End	Self-View Post
Meeting		Emotionally Abused	End- Fallout Coping & Recovery	Wisdom
Enmeshment		Incentivized Self-View During Complicating Factors Couples Therapy Resistance Longevity		

Table 5*Results of Thematic Analysis: Organized by Theme and Subtheme*

Themes	Subthemes
Theme I: Foundations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Self-View- Pre <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Emotionally Vulnerable · Agreeable · Caretaker b) Meeting C) Enmeshment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · INT Characteristics of Attraction · INT Actions of Attraction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Seen o Perfect o Love Bombed o Pedestal · Rapid Progression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Prey o Persistence o Long Game o Grooming
Theme II: Below the Surface	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Instincts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Red Flags <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Noticing Façade o Successful or Trophy
Theme III: Roller Coaster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Devolution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Façade Dropping · Shifting Boundaries · Focus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Admiration o Imbalance b) Emotionally Abused <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Push-Pull <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Walking on Eggshells o Anxiety

Themes	Subthemes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Confusion
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Controlled <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Coercively Controlled o Manipulated o Gaslit o “Humor” o Financial Entitlement o Debt o Devalued & Reduction o “Crazy” o Discredited o Twisted Blame o Scrutinized o Never Good Enough o Conflict o Punished o Threatened o Intimidated o Rage o Isolation o Support o Wedges o Protecting & Covering o Lack of Understanding · Reinforced Manipulation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Lied To o Cheated On o Enabling
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> c) Incentivized <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Justified or Excused Behavior · Promised · Strategically Wooed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Benefit of the Doubt
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> d) Self View- During <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Shrinking · Lonely · Body Image

Themes	Subthemes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · No Voice · Anger & Frustration
e) Complicating Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Addiction · Mental Health · Sexual Issues
f) Couples Therapy	
g) Resistance	
h) Longevity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Mental State <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Shortened Focus o Numb o Exhausted o No Room to Breathe o Self-Esteem o Negative Self-Talk o Fear of Loneliness · PNT Family of Origin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Attachment o Culture · Relationship Beliefs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Spiritual Beliefs o Chosen · PNT Personality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Caretaker o Agreeable o Empathy · Co-Dependence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Triggered Insecurities o Difficulty Trusting o Fear of Loss/High Investment · Binding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Trapped-Stuck · Isolation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Lack of Understanding o Shame/Humiliation · INT Personality

Themes	Subthemes
	o Charming Façade
	o INT Family of Origin
Theme IV: Recovery & Leaving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Self-View- End <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lost Self b) End/Fallout <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · High Conflict · Vindictive Backlash · Surveilled <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Trauma Response c) Coping & Recovery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Self-Focus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Self-Love o Self-Care o Therapy o Medication o Research o Labelling o Examining Beliefs o Acceptance o Positive Outlook o Future Planning o Routine o Asserting Boundaries o Release o Proof o Understanding Patterns · Space · Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Community of Understanding o New Partner · Independence · Modelling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Kids o Mentoring
Theme IV: Hindsight	a) Self View- Post

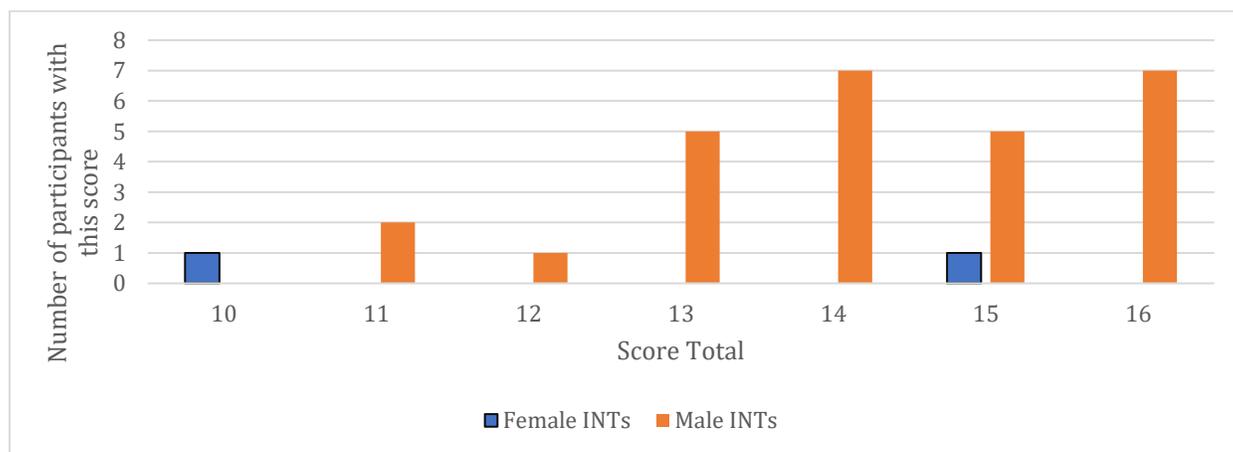
Themes	Subthemes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Trusting Instincts · Strength & Resilience · Asserting Boundaries
b) Wisdom	

From a contextual perspective, and to provide information about the INT behaviors that the PNTs were experiencing, an additional level of coding was also completed that identified social exchanges which fitting the nine narcissistic diagnostic criteria listed in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Many participants had developed knowledge for labelling narcissistic behaviors by investigating the problems in their relationships either during or after the breakup and would use terminology such as “grandiose”, “gaslighting”, or alternatively would describe events that fit these behavioral patterns. In addition, the screening tool contained questions from Durvasula (2015) that were designed to capture the kinds of narcissistic behaviors that may have occurred in the relationship in a yes or no format. (See Appendix F). The two criteria which proved difficult to identify in a meaningful way were fantasies of success and envy, since those required more direct knowledge of the INT’s inner world, and indications of arrogance were only mentioned by some of the participants at the outset of their stories. Notably, most of the behaviors that might encapsulate either of the two subtypes (grandiose and vulnerable) were generally seen in all INT partners, however, some characteristics tended to feature more heavily for each. This level of coding was strictly designed as a contextual framework for a richer understanding of the atmosphere experienced by participants and did not direct the final coding structure aside from in this capacity.

The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) lists the diagnostic criteria for narcissism as five or more of the following concerns in an elevated way: grandiosity, fantasies of unlimited success and power, belief in their specialness or uniqueness, requiring excessive admiration, entitled, exploitative, lacking empathy, envious or believes others are envious, and arrogant or haughty. All participants completed a partner-report Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (Ames et al., 2006) as a threshold measure for entry into the study and must have answered positively to the element consistent with narcissism for at least 10 out of 16 of the dyadic question choices to be considered.

Figure 3

NPI-16 Partner Report Scores



There has been some critique in more recent years that the DSM-5 misses some important criteria that would capture the elements of the vulnerable or covert subtype of narcissism (King et al., 2020; Skodol et al., 2014), perhaps making this behavioral set more difficult to identify, potentially both clinically and in everyday life. Dayet al. (2020) delineate the elements that are common between grandiose and vulnerable subtypes,

however, suggest that the emphasis on the grandiose component ignores a lack of extroversion and heightened ego fragility that may be characteristic of the manifestation of some versions of pathological narcissism. Vulnerable narcissism encapsulates traits such as heightened neuroticism and some lack of charm and extroversion as compared with the grandiose subtype. The SB-PNI-CV assessment (Pincus et al., 2009) included in the screening tool parses the participants' reports of their INT partners' narcissistic behaviors, with the grandiose subtype making up approximately 52% of partners, the vulnerable subtype approximately 14% of partners, and scores that were elevated for partners in both subtypes were approximately 34%. The partner's narratives tended to reveal INT behaviors that were commiserate with these initial scores and in a couple of likely cases of the vulnerable subtype, this was often confirmed directly by participants without my prompting.

Table 6

INT Partner-Report Super-Brief PNI Scores

INT	Subtype		Elevated in Both Subtypes		
	Grandiose	Vulnerable	Similar Scores in Both	More Grandiose	More Vulnerable
Female	0	1	1	0	0
Male	15	3	4	3	2
Totals	15	4	5	3	2

A Narcissist's Prayer

"That didn't happen."
 "And if it did, it wasn't that bad."
 "And if it was, that's not a big deal."
 "And if it is, that's not my fault."
 "And if it was, I didn't mean it."
 "And if I did..."
 "You deserved it."
 (Anonymous, n.d.)

Themes

The hierarchy of the codes were arranged in chronological order of participant experience and relationship events, which may not reflect the order in which narration occurred. The themes that emerged were related to the stages or trajectory of the relationships, however, a few of the codes straddled several chronological eras, which will be discussed under the appropriate themes. Starting with the "Foundations" or the establishment of the relationship, followed by the PNT being able to peek "Below the Surface" to their partners' more hidden qualities, the "Roller Coaster" of wooing paired with increasingly negative behavior, "Recovery and Learning" which sometimes began prebreak up and sometimes post, and "Hindsight" knowledge based on what the PNT has learned from the experience.

Foundations

This first theme resulted from one of the major story points of all the relationships, which was the time encapsulating meeting the INT partner and the wooing process which established the bond. Participants reported either intense attraction or repulsion to their partners upon meeting them, a strong reaction one way or another. This

initial stage was generally characterized at some point by heavy courtship and persistence towards the PNT. Many of the PNTs reported noticing instinctual feelings of doubt very quickly but suppressed these feelings after a time. There would often be an initial period during which the INTs would say or do all the right things to appeal to the PNT, thus creating a powerful feeling of connection. See Appendix D for the Code Hierarchies map.

Self View- Pre

This main code represents the PNT's description of the self in the time before and around meeting the INT. Many of the PNTs described themselves as feeling positive in terms of their self-view before dating their INT in a way that might make it seem difficult to take advantage of. However, dichotomous data appeared in this code since a majority of participants were doing very well in life but had some capacities that lent themselves to vulnerabilities in the romantic partnership realm.

All the PNTs described themselves as achieving or on their way to achieving success and those who were beyond their teen years were self-supporting, however, it became clear that most of the participants tended to downplay their achievements. 'Independent' came up frequently, often paired with the suggestion that this feeling eroded over time within the relationship. Dorian provides a view into the minds of some of PNTs who felt they were living a great life and ready for a more permanent partner, "I was in the best shape of my life because I was at the gym all the time, eating healthy, and mentally I felt great. I was confident, I was living and loving life and just having fun." While participants tended to describe they were in a good moment in their lives at the time of meeting the INT, they also acknowledged they felt vulnerable in romantic

relationships. For instance, mentioning that their confidence and success may have been an attractant to their INT partners but paired with certain self-views that were not as positive, or were indeed positive in most situations but used against the PNT during the relationship. Robin points out that, “I had strength in different ways, but they were ways that kind of made me more vulnerable.” And Jessica speaks about how her desire to see good in others will override her own judgement at times:

It’s like my fatal flaw, trying to see the good in people to the fault. It’s like I don’t give myself enough credit for that good in me because I try so hard to make the other person good or see the good in them as opposed to just actually trusting myself and my own gut, I guess.

A robust example of this aspect, which will also be discussed in relevance to other codes, is a tendency to put others before the self, or to be conflict avoidant at least in terms of romantic relationships. For example, Rita and Valerie described themselves as being a “doormat” in relationships and could be pushed around, Robin and Kyla as “meek”.

There were some participants who spoke about feeling less assured than the above participants, in that they felt a sense of lower confidence or self-worth at the beginning, which was only diminished further in the relationship. Dustin highlights this thought by relating, “On a personal relationship front I was not sure or confident about myself. I used to feel I am not good enough, have low self-esteem, not worthy of love.” Robin felt that her sense of insecurity about herself was what allowed her partner to take advantage of her, it made her “vulnerable to takers”, and perhaps was common to participants with this susceptibility. However, both Ani and Mona pointed out that while in these

relationships they had allowed their partners to set the tone, and this was unique in terms of other relationships or relationship types.

Another element of self-view that was prevalent in accounts of participants at the entrée of their relationships sense of naivety related to youth or relationship inexperience, something which seemed to dramatically change by the ending of the dyad. Rita expressed a concept was alluded to by several participants:

Alanis Morrissette has a line which says, “I’m very sad for the woman I was then.” I’m very sad for the woman I was then. I was naïve. I thought that the ways we were different were all workable and I was very wrong. There are some things that aren’t workable.

Tara stated that she felt she was developing her personality at the time and, like others, stated that she could not recognize the manipulations. These participants believed that if they had more previous knowledge or exposure around INT characteristics, perhaps these relationships might have turned out differently, or not began at all. A related trait describing their vulnerability in relationships was participant difficulty in setting boundaries in the romantic realm (which is discussed further in the Agreeable code).

In sum, while participants often had success and assurance in other realms, they explained that they had certain vulnerabilities regarding their confidence in setting the tone of a relationship and described a level of naiveté that precluded them from seeing the INT’ manipulations. The above beliefs about the self were all mentioned in the context of relevance for creating the foundational pieces of a deeper relationship with the INT, however, there were three other concepts which continually reappeared in the data

in-regards to self-view that were considerable enough to establish discreet codes for, that of emotional vulnerability at the beginning in some way, the personal quality of agreeableness, and a desire to caretake others.

Emotionally Vulnerable. This is a subcode for the participants' original self-view and implies that at the time of beginning the relationship, PNTs were in a period of some form of emotional vulnerability, including being very young to start a serious relationship, a notable age gap between the PNT and INT partners (suggesting a possible power imbalance from the start), recent break-up, a difficult or large life transition (including in Cecilia's case, the death of a parent), health issues, and high stress. All but three participants reported some form of these vulnerabilities as a precursor to dating their partner.

Robin, for example, suggested that her youth, inexperience, and lower self-esteem exposed her to the INT and relates that her partner very likely chose her specifically because she was emotionally vulnerable since it would have been too difficult to take advantage of someone who was more secure. Kyla stated that the age gap stood out as a major factor for her in that her youth contributed to the INT's ability to manipulate her. She said, "He always knew what he wanted to do and where he wanted to be at what point. I was young and malleable and didn't really know what I wanted yet." Youth and the age gap likewise stood out for Claire, and she directly spoke of the power differential that was inherent. She felt that her INT partner needed her to be a "broken butterfly" so that he could play the white knight, riding into her rescue. Nancy stated:

I had no idea what a boundary was because I was 17 when I entered into that relationship and very quickly, it was made sure that I should never know what a boundary is. So, he didn't have to worry about busting through anything. He could just waltz right in and set up shop.

Madeline reported that she had recently been through a break-up and was experiencing a messy and turbulent time, which included a bout of low self-esteem. Other participants were recovering from a recent break-up. "I feel that he was very aware of this emotional roller coaster I was on and how vulnerable I felt at the time. I was a mess. I lost my long-term partner and all the mutual friends that we had." (Valerie) Some PNTs discussed that their experiences in previous relationships had set up a normalization of toxicity that affected how they viewed interactions with their INT partners.

There were several participants in different phases of life transitions. Some were new to their cities and just establishing new routines, and Ani, for example, specified that she was on her own for the first time. Mia felt that she was an "easy target" due to needing to find a new job and wanting to break up with a partner. Megan was leaving her family home and was beginning to realize that the career she had been preparing for was not the one she wanted, a "devastating" insight. Jessica had been training and competing in the Olympics so was also facing a new chapter; retirement from rigid routines into "normal" life, with a determination to find a serious relationship leading to family.

Other vulnerable areas participants were experiencing included health concerns and heightened stress. For example, Elise was working on sobriety and had been recently

diagnosed with ADHD, which had caused her to believe that there was something very wrong with her. Rita wondered:

So, I think going into that relationship, I was damaged goods in that I was at risk of struggling with the sense of self in the relationship because of my past, my background and my childhood. And so, I'm forever ashamed and disappointed that it would have gone differently if I was a healthier person going into it.

Similarly, Wendy described a turbulent and stressful time while attending her final year of university and working two jobs while dealing with her mother's addiction and a friend's mental health issues. Table 7 presents a breakdown of participant reported emotional vulnerabilities that existed upon meeting the INT.

Table 7*Source of Emotional Vulnerability before meeting the INT*

Participants	Source of Emotional Vulnerability Before Meeting the INT
Madeline	Break up, turbulent period, low self-esteem
Robin	Youth, inexperience, transition time, new city, low self-esteem
Kyla	Youth, age gap, malleability
Mia	Transition time, wanting to leave former partner, work instability
Claire	Young, age gap, power differential, insecurity, "broken butterfly"
Megan	Young, age gap, "stretched thin", high stress, transition time, work instability
Dawn	na
Valerie	Young, age gap, transition time, break up
Ani	Young, new city, on own for first time
Ava	Young, age gap
Sophia	Break up
Dustin	Low self-esteem/worth
Jessica	Major transition time, feeling "desperate"
Eleanor	na
Cecilia	Young, parent death, low self-esteem, "toxic" former relationship
Nancy	Young, transition time
Ruby	Break up (divorce), family concerns, feeling "desperate" for companionship, feeling "out of control"
Una	Break up, health concerns
Wendy	Young, transition time, turbulent, friend and family concerns, very busy
Brooke	Break up, transition time, feeling "lost"
Diana	Young, abusive former relationship, broken
Rita	High stress, pet loss, "damaged good"
Morgan	Young, financially strained, busy, pressure, strong desire for partnership
Elise	Break up, ADHD diagnosis, working on sobriety
Tara	Young, age gap, malleable
Mona	Young, new city, transition time
Dorian	Break up, quick meeting
Vanessa	Break up, multiple NPD/abusive partners, "barely hanging on"
Iris	na

Agreeable. This subcode represents an aspect of personality that was a factor in the longer-term bonds of the PNT-INT dyad. 23 of the participants exhibited some form of heightened accommodation, flexibility in their own needs, self-sacrificing behavior in favor of their partner (prioritizing their partner to their detriment), were eager to please, showed high levels of trust (allowing justifications for poor behavior from INTs), and/or acted in the role of the social peacekeeper. Agreeableness appeared to maintain of the relationship through heightened difficulties related to narcissistic traits of partners, including such things as controlling or manipulative behavior.

Jessica considered agreeableness to be her “superpower”. Elise stated that she was so agreeable that she would accept everything and allowed the INT to maintain control at her own expense. Mona did this as well because she did not want to be viewed as a “bad person”, (in stark contrast to her professional life). Others described themselves as “accommodating” or “people pleasers” who took responsibility for others’ emotional states. They relayed that they have always put others before themselves, and that they were so easygoing that they didn’t point out much of their partner’s negative behaviors.

Some of that is my own issue. It’s been prevalent in relationships even prior to him. In every other avenue of my life, I am so not like that. I’ve got a good job for somebody my age, and I’m good at it because I’m so decisive. Then in my personal life, I’m terrible. Like I’m a total pushover. Most of my friendships are fairly one-sided. And it’s not because I’m such a good person. It’s because that works for me too, because then I don’t have to be putting stuff out there. (Mona)

I think that I also wasn't able to maintain boundaries in certain friendships. But in professional other kinds of relationships, I was. I would say mostly romantic and some friendships, I had a hard time, not even just keeping boundaries, but seeing the boundaries and having my own boundaries. (Wendy)

Kyla found that she would generally concede because her partner had more forceful assertions, similarly to Mia who would "go with the flow" of the relationship. Claire had been required to prioritize her mother's wellbeing which she suggested translated into her relationship where she would accede to her partner's wishes. Others like Iris stated that they "just wanted to keep the peace", implying plasticity boundaries:

I'm flexible. I'm easy and happy. And a nice person. Hard working. And like I said, I think they seek out certain personalities that that can be taken advantage of because you're so nice. I was afraid to speak back. It's not how I'm brought up. You don't argue and you don't speak back, period. I'm not one to be angry.

A few explained that was rare for them to have a strong sense of need for themselves, and so they would let others make decisions for them or they would try to be flexible and to understand the other person's point of view. Eleanor postulated that, "maybe if I had a lot of needs, the relationship wouldn't have continued" and that she had a hard time saying "no", which seemed to be something her INT partner preferred. Jessica linked her flexibility in needs to a momentary lessening of mental load:

He was quite confident. This is probably a fairly common theme I would imagine of narcissists. So, that actually felt really comforting to me. This guy knows what he wants and if I don't have to make a decision about what we do on the

weekend, because he will. That's one less thing for me to have to worry about.

So, I kind of leaned in onto him a lot to make decisions about things. I also didn't want to break into any arguments. I didn't want conflict.

Cecilia realized that she had learned not to have expectations in her relationship and in hindsight could see how this was encouraged by her INT partner, saying:

My needs weren't anything. Like right down to the simple things like birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's Day, all that stuff. Nothing. I learned to not have any expectations because I wasn't going to get anything.

Many participants suggested that they were not good at setting romantic boundaries and that like Cecilia, any ability to do so was eroded by INT behavior. While most of the PNTs reported some form of consistent agreeableness before and within the relationships, many of the participants also suggested that they are now working on behaviors for tempering this positive quality with healthy boundaries post-relationship.

Caretaker. The caretaker quality likewise offered an opening for the INT to take advantage of their partner, and many of the participants suggested that they are helpers both in the romantic sense and also in other parts of their lives. This cost encompasses examples in a logistic, physical, or emotional way. The caretakers would often prefer to feel badly themselves than have the INT undergo negative feelings. Close to half of the participants have chosen and are currently employed in helping fields of work, ranging from healthcare to firefighting, for example. The caretaking was usually not exclusive to the PNT-INT dyad but occurred in their other relationships as well.

A third of participants asserted that they felt responsible to caretake, nurture, and manage their INT partner's emotional state and would act accordingly to make sure that the INT did not feel discomfort or that the INT got what they wanted from them. Though they were willing to go "above and beyond" (Megan), this was not reciprocated by the INTs. Claire highlights this concept by saying, "Forget about me. That kind of nurturing, mothering thing in me that would go, oh, I can't just abandon this injured puppy. I must take care of him. That's what would come up quite often." Una said, "I was constantly protecting him from having emotions or having feelings about anything. And that's something that also shows up in other relationships in my life". Eleanor specified that it was her role to make her partner happy and that she was very good at it, but self-sacrificed to do so. "What I think the narcissistic personality looks for is they look for caretaking personalities. The people who "suck it up, buttercup." In some situations, INTs would play on their sense of empathy to trigger the caretaking impulse and would act as the victim. Some identified that as a form of INT manipulation, they would end up caretaking the INT, even though they had originally been the hurt party. In Ava's case, "I thought, maybe if I could show him enough unconditional love, I could love him out of his funk, out of his desire to constantly chase something."

In summary, while participants were often self-assured, accomplished, or on their way to success in many facets of their lives when meeting their partners, almost all showed some form of vulnerability that was taken advantage of by their INT partners. In addition, and likely contributing factors to this, were personality traits of agreeableness and caretaking (including high empathy).

Meeting

The initial meeting of the PNT-INT dyads varied widely in terms of encounters. Participants reported meeting their partners online (5), through work (10), through friends (6), abroad (1), school (3), or at a party or nightclub (4). In Dustin's case, the marriage was arranged by parents after promising first impressions. There were often very polarized feelings around the INT person, from extreme dislike (7 of the participants) to feelings of instant connection. Some participants were won over by longer-term persistence on the part of the INT, others by a campaign of charm and love-bombing.

The participants who were attracted to their partner at first blush often described a whirlwind style of courtship, much of which is delineated in the "Attraction", "Charming Façade", or "Rapid Progression" codes. However, the participants who disliked their partners at first had some similar ideas to share. The term "arrogant" was used by some. Megan suggested that her partner seemed "pretentious", and Ani and Eleanor stated that they "hated" the INTs the first time they met. Eleanor found her partner exuded an air that he was "better than everyone else." All the participants who described disliking their partners at first reported primarily grandiose subtype tendencies in the screening tool.

Enmeshment

This main code describes an intensity in the onset of relationships that more completely enveloped the parties together in multiple facets of their lives. The processes through which this occurred in the relationships is delineated in the subcodes below. 13 of the participants spoke about this phenomenon, most of them addressing the idea that there was a large amount of intense time spent together initially.

Una pointed out that this intensity was not typical of her other relationships. She enjoyed the initial sensation, affirming that, “At the beginning, it was pretty romantically intense. Again, feeling quite special and enjoying that and feeling there was a lot of closeness and long discussions.” Megan suggested that the intensity via love-bombing and compliments presented a sort of addictive high for her. Both Kyla and Mia feature the darker side to this enmeshment, in that parts of their own lives began to fall away. “During that honeymoon phase of our relationship. We did everything together, 24/7 – to the point where I stopped speaking to old friends. That sort of contact completely went away. He basically occupied all of my time.” (Mia). Ani acknowledged that she was too enmeshed to make sense of the relationship, that she couldn’t see it for what it was, while for Ruby, it was an escape from “real life”.

For some participants, this enmeshment continued throughout the relationship. Mona suggested that the natural transition that one might expect into daily life with less intensity never occurred:

I think anytime you’re in a new relationship, you’re together all the time and you kind of build this little bubble around yourselves. That’s not that odd that over time your bubble gets a bit bigger, and you start living your life. You don’t call in sick to work just to hang out together anymore. That never happened.

Wendy attributes this intensity to the longevity and speculates that perhaps the relationship lasted longer than it would have due to the level of enmeshment:

I think part of the issue with our relationship was that very fact, that there wasn’t a lot of space and distance. I think part of the reason maybe that it lasted so long

was because we were very interconnected. Our friends were the same group of friends. I worked at the same [place] that his father worked at, and it was kind of this whole ecosystem.

Interestingly, aside from Diana, none of the seven participants who initially disliked their partners reported a sense of enmeshment, suggesting perhaps a lower level of investment in the success of the relationships from the outset. Participants indicated rather that it was their partner's flattering persistence that ultimately wore them down.

Attraction. Part of the intensity of some of the INT-PNT connections could potentially be explained by the attraction that participants felt to their partners due to INT characteristics and to actions the INTs took to create attraction. This subcode represents what drew participants to their partners enough to date them and for many, to eventually commit to the relationship in a more serious way.

INT Characteristics of Attraction. Participants noticed that their partners were often charismatic and socially adept or alternatively intelligent, likeable, and physically attractive/well kept, or represented stability.

As Wendy was speaking about her attraction, she mentioned how instantaneous it was. "The first day I met him I wanted to be with him. I was very, very instantly drawn to him." Many of the participants spoke about their partner's charming quality and how they could entice people in towards them, referring to their partners as "charismatic". Kyla mentioned that her partner would always be the center of attention in any group, and Claire that "everyone around him adored him or really respected him". Cecilia described her partner as "funny", and Sophia was attracted to her partner's confidence. Some

participants spoke about how socially adept their partners were, how positively people around would respond, or that they had the appearance of a normal social group. Many participants referred to the fun and excitement that their partners would bring to the table, including playful banter and wit. Some participants noted that their partners presented themselves in a certain physical way designed to attract people.

On the flip side of charm or charisma, there were some participants who stated that their partner presented more of a quieter draw, in that they seemed “likeable” or a caring and considerate person. Generosity came up as an attractant for a few participants. For some, it was their partners manners or family values that stood out for them, some describing their partner as a “gentleman”. Mona specified that the “old-school values” seemed appealing at first, until she had to deal with them in real life. One of the other particularly large inducements for participants was a sense of stability, which was described in a variety of ways, such as being established in life or on their way to becoming so, having consistency or a routine, presenting as highly professional and/or successful. Kyla expressed that, “He’s older, he’s muscular, and he’s a grown up, and that’s really attractive. [He] had this older more mature wisdom that I hadn’t seen in a guy before. He knew what he wanted and where he wanted to go.’ The aspect of success or having their “stuff together”, was particularly important to six participants. Ani stated, “I really thought I was getting married to someone who was going to be a good partner and was going to be successful, and we were going to have a good life.” However, Megan made the point that her partner would ensure that everyone around was aware his success, “he would always throw around how wealthy he is basically and how he did it

all by himself.” Many of the participants admired their partners’ intelligence or their ability to hold “great” and deep conversations, which provided an important sense of “mental connection” (Brooke).

Four of the PNTs mentioned important features that attracted them to the relationship with their INT partners that were not repeated by other participants. Dustin revealed that his partner seemed softspoken, calm, and seemed to have a simplicity that was alluring, Ruby found a shared faith to be pleasing because she had not had that with her previous relationship, Brooke enjoyed the risqué and satisfying nature of their sex life, and Rita found the combination of passion and an interest in travel paired with heightened responsibility in life to be rare and appealing.

INT traits presented a draw for PNTs, however, there were also INT actions specifically designed to woo that were effective. These aspects were large and frequent enough within the data to develop their own subcodes within the “INT Actions of Attraction” subcode.

INT Actions of Attraction. Participants were also drawn in because of specific actions of the INTs and the way that they felt as a result. This includes feeling “Seen” by their partner in a way they never had before, feeling that their partner was the “Perfect” person for them, being regularly “Love Bombed” with showers of attention, gifts, and acts of service, being put on a “Pedestal” as if they could do no wrong and they were incredibly special to the INT.

Seen. Nine of the participants recognized that their INT partners seemed to have an uncanny understanding right away about characteristics and things that were most meaningful to them, such as Megan:

It kind of felt cool to be recognized for things that I don't necessarily get recognized for. It was kind of like a breath of fresh air, like catching a break. And we were talking, and he was very, just very aware of everything that I was doing. And he commented on that's how he knows how my brain works.

PNTs noticed that INTs figured out their likes and dislikes very quickly and were observant and insightful about how to fulfill needs and wants early on, creating a sense of special support. Being seen and understood helped to create rapid and deep attraction to the INT partner. As Robin said, "When I met him, "Oh my God, this could be the one. He could be this person, he just gets me." Valerie elaborated, "He was very observant. He knew things about me that I didn't even realize". Megan identified that the magnified amounts of attention from her INT pursuer were very attractive to her, "It was almost like a drug. It was addicting to get his validation and his acceptance. That's what hooked me."

For many participants however, this observational power became problematic later because INTs could take advantage of the depth of their understanding of the PNT.

At the beginning I would say some of the things I remember most vividly is how much attention he paid to everything that mattered to me and how he ensured that he listened and that he was on my side. It changed. It was definitely all at the beginning to lure me into his plan for sure. But he did such a good job of it. It's almost like the guy took notes and had the ability to touch on the things that were

very emotional and then make me feel really good that he had noticed they were important to me. (Brooke)

Perfect. Perhaps because of the INTs' heightened ability to observe important elements to the PNTs, 11 of the participants felt that they had met their perfect partner upon beginning their relationships. INT seemed to present PNTs' ideal person. They felt they were able to form deep and "incredible" connections with someone who appeared to be their "soulmate".

For Brooke, this connection helped her put down stresses and negative memories for a while. "At the initial stage, they make you feel like none of the negative stuff that's happened to you in your life matters because you are the perfect person for them." Some participants described that INT interests seemed to be like a complete mirror of their own and how well the INT fulfilled a mental checklist. "Everything I was into, going to gym, everything, it was a complete mirror. It was everything I said, "Yes, I love that too. Yes, I want to do that too". (Dorian) Wendy elaborated:

I would describe it as very magnetic. I felt like we were drawn to each other, and I think other people noticed it too, I guess it felt I met the person I'd been waiting to meet. It felt magical and all these emotions that were very overwhelming too. "I thought I was swept off my feet and this was the one – he had convinced me. Honestly, if you could write the perfect person down on paper, that's what he was." (Dawn)

Love Bombed. Participants often mentioned intensely romantic or grand gestures, high levels of attention, persistence, and heightened responsiveness at the beginning of the relationships. In hindsight, participants indicated that this seemed to be a strategy to

lure them in and was maintained only to the point that the PNT felt committed to the relationship, or in later stages when the PNT might be pulling away. 19 of the participants described some form of love-bombing in the initial stages of their relationships that served to draw them into deeper commitment.

Robin recounted, “I remember that at the very beginning, he came home from work, here are flowers, and your favourite meal. It wasn’t him being genuine in his effort, I think it was the façade of the little honey trap.” Dorian suggests that the love-bombing was what led him to believe that everything was “right” in the relationship in the initial stages, “So we moved in together, and that’s when... I mean you’re familiar with all the terms, like the “love bombing,” “devalue,” and “discard.” That’s why I feel like everything was right, because everything that I was into...”.

Frequent and flowery compliments were one of the methods used to love-bomb. Sophia noted that her partner seemed to say “I love you” too much in the beginning. Another method of seduction was the appearance of generosity, “Trying to charm me at the beginning he would shower me with attention, with gifts. And he would give me expensive things, things that no one else in my life would give me.” (Valerie)

Then, compliments started. I know now it was love bombing. There wouldn’t be a minute that went by that he didn’t talk about how amazing I was, how smart, how beautiful, how interesting, how different from any other woman he’d ever met. “You’re just so different, you’re so unique, you’re so perfect for me. I’ve never had anybody like this before in my life. I’ve never had anybody treat me so well. I’ve never had love like this.” So, I felt like this person sees me as so wonderful.

It's very seductive for somebody to not just adore everything about you but to see the uniqueness and even the things that you're insecure about. (Eleanor)

Others reported high levels of attentiveness or affection wherein they were showered with time and effort spent and/or verbal or physical care. "Just so affectionate but not in a needy way. Didn't seem to hold back his emotions, was very emotionally generous."

(Dawn) For Jessica, it was a message that the relationship could lead to marriage and family because of the efforts of her partner, "Wow, if somebody's going to put that much time and effort into hanging out for the day, that shows me something. It felt like he was quite interested and willing to put the time and effort into being with me."

Mona eventually noticed that the attentiveness in the beginning had morphed gradually into something that became "controlling and overbearing". Sophia describes a shift that occurred as the relationship progressed. She was told by her partner that she had abused his generosity so he would no longer treat her well:

He would do everything for me. Even things that I wouldn't expect him to do, he would just go and do it. He would surprise me. He would buy me gifts. He would make plans with my friends. He would tell me stories so I'd fall asleep. It just gradually just dissipated, and they went away. I remember telling my friends, "I'm so in love with him. This is it." Then, somehow, the relationship shifted.

Pedestal. This subcode represents the outcome for PNTs of feeling seen, that they have found their perfect partner, and the love-bombing. The frequent admiration and validation allowed PNTs to believe they were their partner's priority and boosted ego or self-esteem. Ten of the participants reported feeling this way in the beginning.

Megan described, “Make you feel like you’re on top of the world.” Dawn elaborated, “He made me feel like I was the centre of the universe for him.” Eleanor noted that her partner seemed to love all the things she was insecure about in herself. Valerie addressed this ability that seemed to be a special skill her partner had:

But one of the reasons why I really, really enjoyed being with him was how he praised me, the compliments that he gave me. He made me feel like I was very special. He made me feel like I was an attractive person. The validations that he gave me were unlike the validations that I received before. And he was very good at just sort of pumping me up, and he can put me on a pedestal.

That feeling of being wooed did not last for participants. Fairly quickly in the relationships, almost all participants who had described being put on a pedestal through feeling seen and love bombed also spoke about how that behavior changed or was eliminated after the first phase of the relationship. “They make you feel really good about everything in your life until they start to break you down.” (Brooke) Vanessa explains it as a form of reality that enters the relationship, wherein previously she was idealized, and now her INT partner was faced with the concept of her as a three-dimensional person with multiple facets and needs, less of a perfect object. “I was this person’s dream person. And then all of a sudden of course, I have warts and pimples.”

Rapid Progression. Because of the romantic intensity of the wooing stage of many of these relationships and promises of an ideal future often they moved quickly into heavier enmeshment than might be typical. 12 of the participants indicated this to be the

case, however, Dustin's marriage was arranged, so the increased commitment levels early on could be expected.

The romantic rapidity of the relationship was noted by Megan who described it as happening at "warp speed". "He told me that first night, I've always had a thing for you, and he just pushed it. So, it became romantic and intimate and all that stuff, basically right off the bat." Dorian pointed out that this intensity and speed was unique to this relationship, "Kind of out of character for me. But I remember specifically saying this to her, 'Everything feels right.'" Two participants noted that the INT said "I love you" unusually quickly in the relationship. Three of the participants were introduced to INT families, including extended family in Morgan's case, very early on.

Six participants reported moving in very quickly with the INTs, in Jessica and Dorian's case, purchasing a house together very fast. Robin stated that financially it made sense to her to move in, but in hindsight felt that her partner wanted to take advantage. Nancy was given a promise ring by her partner as a teen after a few months of dating, and an engagement ring on their first anniversary of dating. She described being in the "deep end quickly". Eight other participants got married to their INT partner rapidly, in Dawn's case, it happened within a few weeks after meeting in a foreign country:

We got married eight weeks after meeting. Predominantly, one, because I thought I was swept off my feet and this was the one – he had convinced me – and two, because he needed a work permit if he was going to live [here]. So, if we were going to make it work, we had to be married.

Mona found this experience to be strange, “He told me he loved me the first week. At the time, I’d roll my eyes, “Yeah. No, you don’t,” but that is weird.” Madeline proposed that had she taken the time to get to know her partner more, likely the marriage probably would not have taken place.

In reflection, many of the participants spoke about the skilled or strategic nature of the initial wooing behaviors of their partners. While many participants had a sense that something was off about their partners’ behaviors, it wasn’t until later stages in the relationships, when all INT actions could be taken into account, that most PNTs were able to name what they had been seeing. These labels form the essence of the subcodes of Rapid Progression below, revealing underlying feelings that participants had about their partners’ initial wooing activities, and becoming a reinterpretation of events from their original impressions.

Prey. This subcode refers to the feeling that nine of the participants expressed around the exploitation of their emotional vulnerabilities, insecurities, or their willingness to please. To some this felt like a predator-prey relationship due to the strategic nature of many of the INTs’ actions.

Five of the participants spoke about extreme intensity of pursuit by their INT partners in the wooing stage. Mia indicated she had never been “pursued quite that hard before”. Robin felt her partner specifically targeted her due to her insecurities and emotional vulnerabilities that he would clearly take advantage of.

I feel like that was a crux in my life and a very vulnerable place when I finally started that relationship with this particular narcissistic individual. He knew... it

was kind of like he was watching the whole thing, and he admitted to that and knew when to come in. It was a plan for years to get me involved somehow. It made me feel very much like at some point you were going to break me down. Everything was crafted in such a way to corner me. And it was like a cat and mouse. I couldn't get out of it. (Megan)

Three participants detailed how INTs bided their time until the perfect moment of vulnerability. Valerie spoke about her boss persistently building a personal type of relationship, creating a closeness until he manipulated the relationship into intimacy. Brooke communicated that her partner identified just the right time to express romantic interest. "It was what I needed to feel good at that moment. He knew that, and he knew the fact that I wasn't in the best place. It was a good time for him to make his move."

Four participants spoke about their partners' pattern of pursuit as common to other relationships the INTs had previously or after. Robin expressed that her former partner does that regularly as a successful relationship tactic:

I think he's a predator. His history has shown that. He hasn't had a relationship in which the person he became involved with wasn't somebody that had been victimized before and significantly found them when they were still in the process of dealing with that trauma.

Persistence. This is a subcode of "Prey" in that the INT would persist in the pursuit even in the face of rejection using flattery and repeated attention until the PNT was won over to deepen the relationship. Ten of the participants identified persistence in the wooing phase. Claire expressed that her partner gradually inserted himself into her

life until she was dating him, and Valerie's boss would send her messages every day to ask if she would consider a romantic relationship with him, while Iris defined that her partner, "wouldn't leave me alone" with invitations for expensive outings. Diana said that her partner started being very "handsy" with her even while he was dating someone else. Morgan stated, "I remember trying to push him away a lot, but something still kept coming back. So, it took a very long time before we actually started dating. He was very persistent in even considering marriage from the start." Sophia posits that had her INT partner not been so tenacious, they may not have ended up together.

He was a pursuer, so if I had it my way, we probably wouldn't have ended up together. He had confidence. He was smart. He carried himself very well. He appeared, in my first couple interactions with him, very loving to his family, so in my head he has family values. That was attractive. At the time, we would go out and he would blow up the bar, so to speak.

Long Game. This is a subcode of "Prey" as well and indicates how 16 participants felt that INTs seemed to have a long-term strategy for dating them. Some INTs were willing to wait patiently while making their intentions known, others preferred to mask their true intentions. INTs showed a willingness to make strategic plans over the long term to get what they wanted from PNTs, and in at least four of the cases, over years before dating. Brooke spoke about her married partner and him setting the stage for an affair over a long period of time:

He was going to be my friend to support me through the break-up that I had just gone through. He was married and just had [babies]. His marriage "wasn't doing

well”. So, there’s definitely a pattern, and that pattern starts with when he sees that opportunity to strike. He’s good at the game. He’s in it for the long haul, not the short haul. And I think that’s what a shrewd good narcissist is really good at, they’re willing to commit the time to get what they want. Sometimes it’s just to know that they have the power. It’s nothing about love or relationships.

Madeline’s partner made sure to remind her over time that he was available to date, because she had found out that he had initially been involved with someone when they began their relationship the first time. Megan spoke about her partner investing time and effort over two years and planning for a relationship with her, saying, “at some point you were going to break me down.”

Many of the participants described how strategic this pursuit was, Mia indicated, “everything is very calculated. Every move he makes is for a reason”. Jessica related that her partner knew that he had to treat her a certain way to get what he wanted:

For him to get a girlfriend, it was necessary for him to treat me that well. For him to get this house that he dreamed of, it was necessary to treat me in this particular way. And to agree to certain things, like “Oh yeah, we’ll get married for sure.”

Some participants realized in hindsight how much of a game relationships are to INTs:

I feel like life is a gigantic game for him. It’s all a big mind fuck. It’s really hard now to try and be like three steps ahead of what he might do. I’ve known him for 20 years, and I feel like I need to figure out, “What could he take? How would he use it? What is he going to do with it? How is that going to affect me?” And that might not be for months. He will sit and wait. He will sit on it forever. I feel like

that's kind of always been the case. He would bring things up from long ago and throw it in my face for whatever and it would just explode. It was playing games. I guess at the end of the day, he was getting away with things, in the sense that there were no consequences. I wasn't leaving, that was never an option. (Nancy)

Many of the participants also realized eventually that this form of strategizing was not unusual, and that INTs were acting a part to get what they wanted. Cecilia pointed out that her partner wooed people so he could take advantage of them later, that none of the affectionate behaviors were genuine. "Catching soulmates are like catching buses for him. He does what he has to do to rope you in and then takes from there. I realize now that none of the stuff he ever said to me was real."

Grooming. This is a subcode of the "Long Game" code which indicates that the INT has been making either or both covert and overt suggestions to the PNTs to shape them into serving INT wants or being an ideal version of themselves as far as the INT is concerned. This involves pushing against PNT boundaries, often subtly, to set up specific foundations for the way the INT would like for their partners to be. 17 of the participants reported some early version of this as well as throughout the relationships.

Many of the INTs began this process of planting seeds for what they wanted from the PNTs very early on in the relationships. Eleanor gives an example in that her partner chose to "play the victim" thus requiring her care and attention to be focused on him and the way that he wanted things to go in a very subtle way. Some felt that they were prepped by their partners to avoid focusing on their own needs and wants, that INT needs

and wants were more important. Claire did her best to fulfill a specific role for her INT partner, which was that of the model girlfriend according to the INT:

I could be no direct comments of, “this is what I want”. But kind of subtle things, sometimes talking about an ex or about other women, and me of course being the sponge going, “Okay, what do I do? What should I be like?” And that was both positive and negative comments.

Valerie identified later that her INT wanted to mold her into someone entirely different:

In retrospect he was grooming me to become something that I’m not. My original self was just never good enough, from the way I spoke to the way I answered emails or approached my sales. He wanted me to take up more “worthwhile” hobbies and interests.

Participants suggested that many of the INTs did this by creating an atmosphere of debt, by implying that they did so much more for the PNTs or that PNTs were lesser and needed to do more. “Needing me to do more things for him, that kind of thing.

Expectations of, “Look at all I give you. Why don’t you help me with this?”. Never really stating it that way but implied.” (Jessica)

A few were encouraged gradually to participate in sexual fantasies that were uncomfortable for them and served to shift boundaries a bit at a time. Some of the PNTs recognize in hindsight that their partners were moving towards cheating on them, or in Brooke’s situation, on his wife with her. For example, Robin realized that her partner was using his job as an actor to set up advanced excuses for himself to go out and cheat later, tying it into being part of the work.

In summary, the enmeshment with the PNT-INT dyad seemed to be predicated on a combination of factors that enhanced the attraction to the INT. Participant often felt that their new partners took the time to really uncover what was meaningful about them and invested heavily in behaviors that demonstrated unusually high levels of interest and care. This prompted rapid PNT investment into the relationships, and in hindsight, many of the participants identified the long-reaching and strategic nature of these behaviors.

Below the Surface

This second theme represents the next act beyond the wooing phase in the PNT-INT dyad in which the PNTs began to become privy to more obvious negative behaviors of their partners. For many of the participants, there is an overlap in this phase with the wooing process simply because some of these behaviors became visible early on but were explained away enough for the PNT to commit to dating their partners. Small, concerning things began to happen regularly and PNT boundaries were pushed. Romantic pursuit usually began to diminish, and the focus turned in a larger way towards INT needs and wants. For some, this may be the first moment that they really attended to this shift. Please see Appendix D for the Code Hierarchies map.

Instincts

This main code refers to the inherent knowledge that something is not quite right about the situation, specifically the PNT-INT dyadic interactions. This was one of the larger codes in the data set indicated by frequency and depth of discussion. The majority spoke about having some kind of gut feeling very early on, sometimes even before the relationship began, that things were not as they appeared. Some participants felt that they

had never been able to trust their gut, while others expressed that they generally always had good instincts, this relationship aside. However, universally there was agreement over time that the PNT instinctual voice got smaller within the relationship or was overshadowed by louder INT assertions, repeated implications, and/or outright statements designed to question PNT perceptions.

Most spoke about ignoring or suppressing their instincts. Claire realizes now that had she followed her instincts the relationship would not have lasted long at all. Megan stated that “cognitively I knew that was wrong”, but she had moved away from trusting herself and chose to believe her partner, Ani normalized the feeling and “spent a lot of time telling myself a story”, and Mona suggested that “it gets easy to lie to oneself.”

It didn't take long for me to start brushing things under the carpet, start recognizing things were off but chose to ignore them because I didn't think I could get any better. Probably right off the top because I remember feeling like I never fully trusted him. (Cecelia)

Rita described like, “what was up is down” referring to a feeling of distorted reality created by her partner. Diana likewise was influenced by her partner's skill at changing her internal narrative, “I think I didn't trust my instincts anymore at that point. He conditioned me to be that way. So I just ignored the instincts. Also, he was really good at making me not believe my own instincts too.” Wendy (two months in) wondered if her partner was narcissistic but chose not to follow-up with the train of thought. “I knew what my instincts were telling me, but I think I was also afraid to be alone.”

I think that there's probably several different camps of people who dealt with people who potentially have Narcissistic Personality Disorder. There's probably people who knew it and saw it coming, and then people who kind of found themselves in it. And I think I'm in the earlier camp. I knew it all along and I did it anyway, and then I kept doing it. Like what an idiot am I. I'd rather have been the ignorant one who just happened to find themselves in that situation. (Mona)

Six of the participants referred to the uncertainty around their instinctual knowledge, not being quite sure how to make sense of it, and thus being challenged to do anything about it. Rita felt that her instinctual self was seriously damaged by the relationship:

Destroyed. "What was up, was down." So, my instincts, my judgment. What I would say to my best friend at the time was, "I know this is wrong, but I don't know what to do with this information. I know that shouldn't happen, but do you move out?" My instinct knew that was wrong. I have enough of a self that I knew that wasn't an appropriate way to treat an adult. My instincts knew this was appalling behaviour, but it was so in contrast to countless other feelings I was having and a gigantic commitment I had made. I had no idea what a proportional response to this was.

Both Jessica and Brooke recognized that there was something under the surface that they weren't addressing. Brooke pointed out that in hindsight:

I think intuition should never be ignored. It may not be right away. It's not like ooh, a light bulb comes on and you know exactly. It's more just your gut's telling you this isn't right, and I had those feelings. Oh god, did I have those feelings.

But I kept putting them aside because to me the excitement outweighed it. And I think that's it's never worth it.

Some participants were not sure how they missed the signs. Robin emphasized that her partner was so skilled at hiding his true nature, that people would only see the other side when he chose to let them:

I had to learn that I could trust my own judgement. When somebody has been a wolf in sheep's clothing in front of you for four years, you really do sit there and you're like "Maybe I won't know?" I've had to tell myself "It doesn't matter. You will never know, because that's what they do and that's part of the nature of it." People who are narcissistic like that, they're conniving. They're very smart. They're charismatic. They will let you know when they want you to know, but you're not going to know other than that, and you just have to accept that could happen to anyone. It's not just that he fooled me, he's fooling everybody.

Vanessa pointed out that her instincts got fainter over time, "it's been hard to trust my instincts. I think that's what I've lost in all of this. And I believe that's one of the things I haven't been able to reconcile." Elise referred to the continual questioning that took place in the relationship from her partner and from herself, which unfortunately has shown to be somewhat lasting so far:

It totally made me doubt my sense of reality. My sense of reality is very tenuous. I'm always worried that I'm misreading stuff. Like there's something deeply wrong and deeply flawed with me. Every step I take I doubt, and I prevaricate.

Red Flags. This represents a warning sign for danger. It is a subcode of “Instincts” and was identified by 27 of the participants. This code denotes a moment of realization that something their partner has done or said is not right, or that they have a strong feeling that something is wrong. Six participants defined moments like this occurring even before the dating process, four by the first date, almost all the rest within a few months. This suggests that in most of these relationships, early warning signs were there, but often not fully realized or attended to. Many of the red flags are elaborated on in later codes but stand out examples are below.

Mona was one of the participants who identified red flags right away, saying, “It wasn’t like he hid the flags very well. I saw it early. The attentiveness in the beginning was of a different flavour than how it evolved over time.” Claire never felt that she could relax with her partner, and that she did not feel right in the relationship even in good times. Megan began to see her partner’s duplicitous behavior, “Not very far in, it was already bad. I started noticing that depending on who we were talking to, he would acknowledge my existence and our relationship.” On their first date, Robin’s partner resorted to “negging”, a backhanded compliment designed to deliberately undermine a target’s confidence so that they will be easier to seduce. “There were early warning signs. I remember when I met him, one of the first things that he said to me was “I’m really happy you don’t look like your picture.” She said there was early hints of his abusive nature and of turmoil, and he would later randomly tell her about impulses that he had to physically harm her.

In Kyla’s case, her partner later admitted to manipulating her on purpose:

He said something really hurtful, and I asked him why he would say something so cruel. He said something like, “Oh, I’m trying to figure you out. I just want to push your buttons to see what makes you tic.” It was one of those things early on that should have been a big red flag, and I didn’t really realize until years later that that was not okay to do to somebody.

Morgan discussed how her mother’s pervasive and forceful input about her relationship likely prevented her from acting on the red flags that she was seeing in her partner.

Alarm bells went off just before the weddings of at four participants. Jessica saw many red flags early on, but perhaps the largest ones was not only her fiancé’s response to their upcoming wedding (distinct lack of enthusiasm), but her own internal messaging:

One of the other times I had some girlfriends over to plan the wedding and a girlfriend gave me this scrapbook and one of the stickers said, “Love.” And I was like, “Nope.” And it didn’t even occur to me that that wasn’t okay. Like that you need to have that, of all things, before you get into a marriage. I know I love him but I’m not putting that sticker on this page.

Both Megan and Robin noted their partner’s grandiosity as a red flag early on, in the latter case, comparing himself favorably to celebrities.

Some had concerns around how their partner treated other people. Valerie spent time as an employee of her INT and saw the way he would abuse (sometimes violently) other employees, vendors, and even his own family. Wendy noticed her partner’s outsized reaction to any perceived criticism. She talked about him shifting focus back on to himself as a regular practice, “I told him that my mom was an alcoholic, he said, “Oh,

mine is too. She drinks all the time”. I felt like I couldn’t tell him something without him making it about him.” Elise’s partner would badmouth people who she knew to be lovely. Dawn acknowledges that her partner’s ability to quickly move away from his child should have been a warning sign. For at least three of the participants, their partners were willing to cheat on other people to be with them.

Participants observed withdrawal being used as a tool. Ava noted that her partner would leave home and not communicate with her until he felt like it. Wendy said:

I think the communication blackout was definitely a red flag for me. I felt that in my previous relationships it had just been unthought-of that someone would ignore my messages. It said to me that he cared about me while I was there in front of him, but not when I was away. And that to me, that was a worry.

Many of the PNT expressed discomfort or fear around their partner’s tempers, emotionally abusive behaviors, or penchant for picking fights:

I think early on the things that were the most concerning and should’ve been real red flags were his explosive temper over things that didn’t seem consequential in any way. He could get so easily fired up and just go off the deep end about little comments that were made, or if someone would do something wrong or that he perceived as wrong, that was a big thing. (Mia)

Overall participants reported cumulative observations of behaviors triggering instinctual feelings that something was not right with the relationships. Some participants felt that they couldn’t fully “relax” or trust the strength of their relationship. Others spoke about developing concerns around manipulative or controlling behaviors, how their

partners handled finances, how they treated others, signs of aggression or rage, and other new facets of their partner. It was around this time in the relationships that PNTs began to gain insight that they may not have the full picture of their partner's behaviors.

Noticing Façade. This code is indicative of the PNTs new observations that there are at least two distinct sides to their partner's personality, one which is used in private with them and one presented publicly, depending on who is in front of them. 18 participants reported that they saw this behavior once they were committed in some way to the relationship. These observations became more obvious and profound as time went on in the relationships, and some mentioned that in hindsight, it may have started occurring at the point that INTs realized it would be difficult for PNTs to leave. INTs then felt safer to reveal the negative self. The INTs talked a "good game" but did not generally back up the words by actions. There were often large swings between wooing behaviors versus manipulative, aggressive, indifference, or withdrawal behaviors.

Participants became privy to two sides of the INTs as increasingly negative behavior was directed at them. Several participants suggested their partners very deliberately chose to act and treat people differently. Sophia said:

One thing that I've always said about him is he's a social chameleon because he can be in a room with anybody and talk about anything. He knows about every single sport. He's business-savvy. He's very social. I find people that he doesn't like, he won't even acknowledge or address. He won't even be polite to them.

Elise described her reaction to the duality personally and professionally:

I always had people in our house because he would act his best when people were around. It's when the door would close that he would be nonresponsive to me. So I kept it very social for many years. Then the dichotomy between the social Don and home Don became unbearable and I stopped keeping the circus going.

For some participants, this realization happened early on:

In front of everybody else, she would always have that demeanor where she would never disagree with anything, be that person who is very accepting. Like she's going with the flow- she doesn't reject anything. You close the bedroom door, it's a whole other story. (Dustin)

Tara noticed that her husband would talk her up in public, but then undermine her in private. As well, to preserve his social façade, he would use Tara's relationship-building skills to present a caring image, even after complaining about people behind their backs:

He'll ask questions of them and this and that, and then later, if we were to see that person again, he'll ask me what their name was. "What was their name? Just remind me." Then they think he's remembered them and everything about them, but he really hasn't.

For other participants, the realizations came later in the relationship:

Probably it was three years in before I really realized the chameleon I was married to. The persona he was trying to show me had so many cracks in it that you started to see the monster below. It's a shocking realization to realize that you're married to a monster, and it's terrifying because you don't know what that monster is capable of because there's so many lies and inconsistencies. (Dawn)

Robin became aware that she had not truly seen her partner for what he was as more information came out, and she now realizes that most of his behavior was self-serving:

There were a lot of things I didn't know were going on behind my back. He was manipulative and conniving in that way. I found out post break-up, and a lot of people came forward and were like "Here's the real experience of what you're missing." I was seeing a completely different side of him than what our friends were seeing. I spent four years with him, and I didn't know him. He was not who he was presenting in even the slightest way.

In many cases, the INTs' facades kept participants more isolated because often others were not privy to the more negative parts of their personalities and lacked understanding of the effect on the PNTs. Participants found themselves having to carry extra mental loads so that INTs could keep up appearances. Some worked out ways to avoid their partners' more negative behaviors, such as keeping more people around. Others discovered post-relationship that their partners were hiding aspects of themselves or beliefs which might have resulted in a sooner breakup if known.

Successful Trophy. This subcode of "Noticing Façade" addresses the specific successes of the PNTs and how that reflected in the relationship. Without fail, even through difficult times, each of the participants were highly successful in many ways or else on their way to success when they met their partners. What was interesting for me during collection of this data, is that most participants were either very matter of fact about their successes or underplayed them. In some cases, INTs would actively show off their PNT partners, or crow about their successes to others, at least in the beginning, as if

they were trophies. Figure 4 details the successful trajectories that PNTs were on during the time-period in which their partners got to know them.

Figure 4

Participants' Success Trajectories During Era of Meeting INT Partner

Madeline	High placed job, completing undergraduate degree, single mom
Robin	Graduate from a top university, working in field of choice
Kyla	In post-secondary, living independently- paying own bills
Mia	Diploma, specific professional training, professional job
Claire	Degree, working, travelling (then Master's and established career)
Megan	Completing degree, working in field & other jobs (becoming businessperson)
Dawn	Degree, travelling, prestigious well-paying career, home near the beach
Valerie	In post-secondary, planning for future
Ani	Dean's list at post-secondary, homeowner
Ava	Graduated college, working in field, showing at fashion week
Sophia	Undergraduate degree, professional career
Dustin	College and specializations, successful career
Jessica	Degree, Olympic competitor
Eleanor	Completing Master's degree, managerial job
Cecilia	In college and working
Nancy	Highschool, acted as single parent running the household while working
Ruby	Master's degree, working in health orientated field
Una	Master's degree, working in health orientated field
Wendy	In final year of degree, working two jobs
Brooke	Degree, prestigious well-paying career
Diana	Diploma, culinary credentials
Rita	PhD, working at career in field
Morgan	In final year of post-secondary, working multiple jobs
Elise	Finished MBA, working in field
Tara	Registering for uni., planning for future (later Master's with 3 small kids)
Mona	Undergraduate degree, working interim job while looking for work in field
Dorian	Some undergraduate courses, skilled career (firefighter)
Vanessa	Graduate degree, career in an upward trajectory- working with pro athletes
Iris	Master's degree, skilled career

Note: See Table 1 for the demographic breakdown of participants.

While not all the INTs showed off their partners to others, Megan gives an example of her partner acting overtly in this way at the start of their relationship, and another example of an instance showing his sense of ownership of her when he didn't like what she was doing when she went out:

It was partially a control thing and/or a trophy. I was this demonstration of "got 'er". I had started to be this prize that he was showing off to everybody. It was always like that. The manipulative "shame on you, how dare you make me look bad. You make yourself look bad. You represent me".

Participants may have originally felt flattered by the attention, but all who listed this sense of being a trophy to show off to others felt unnerved by their partners' actions. It was often in latter parts of the relationship that there was a realization that their partners were initially viewing them as an object to be displayed and without autonomy.

To his credit, he has excellent taste in women, clearly. He targets professional women who own property, who have a good income, own property, self-assured, self-confident. I think he's attracted to that, but I think he's then intimidated by it and needs to crush it when he's with it. (Dawn)

In summary, almost all participants were receiving instinctual messages about their partners that showed red flag moments, particularly related to the various masks that the INT might wear based on the people or circumstances around them. Some observed that included their roles in relation to their partners' public persona.

Roller Coaster

This is the third theme that the data revealed and represents the time-period in which the PNT-INT dyad experience highs and lows in a cyclical way and which tends to be more extreme than most couples. The highs may be similar to that experienced in the first “Foundation” theme, but they become tempered by what is being seen from the second era, the “Below the Surface” theme. The highs may begin to occur less and less over time, and the lows begin to occur more frequently. These commonly created boundary-shifting situations which became the new norm while the INT revealed increasingly negative behaviors. The INT may have required more emotional and physical labor from the PNT taking away from their personal resources, and emotional abuse became more commonplace. The PNT may be left operating in a state of confusion over the back-and-forth and of their feelings in the relationship, while being manipulated into believing they are the problem. The PNT may feel embarrassment and uncertainty in explaining events of the relationship or may be protective, thus making it difficult to recruit support. For some there was a sense of being bound to the relationship or of an emotional or physical dependence. This theme encompasses the bulk of the relationship, which for some PNTs lasted for many years.

The main codes of this section include (a) the rapid Devolution of the relationships based on their partners’ increasingly negative behaviors- Subcodes of façade dropping, shifting boundaries, focus, admiration, and imbalance; (b) Emotionally Abusive behaviors that may have been hard to identify in the moment- Subcodes of push-pull, walking on eggshells, anxiety, confusion, controlled, coercively controlled,

conditioned, manipulated, gaslit, “humor”, financial entitlement, debt, devalued & reduction, name called, “crazy”, discredited, twisted blame, scrutinized, never good enough, conflict, punished, threatened, rage, isolation, support, wedges, protecting & covering, lack of understanding, reinforced manipulation, lied to, cheated on, and enabling; (c) Negative behaviors were often contrasted by good times and positive INT behaviors, often in a cyclical fashion. This included periods of Incentivizing participants to keep them tied to the relationships primarily through justified-excused behavior, being promised special moments and things, and being strategically wooed by behaviors that were just what the participants had been desiring throughout the relationship; (d) Participants Self-Views During this time were often at the lowest point- Subcodes of shrinking, lonely, body image, no voice, and anger & frustration; (e) Complicating Factors in some of the relationships- INT addiction, mental health issues, and sexual issues; (f) Many dyads attempted Couples Therapy with no success; (g) During this time, participants mentioned the most examples of Resistance to their partners’ abusive behaviors; (h) and explained some of the reasons behind the relationship Longevity- Subcodes of PNT mental state, shortened focus, numb, exhausted, no room to breathe, self-esteem, negative self-talk, fear of loneliness, PNT family of origin, attachment, culture, relationship beliefs, spiritual beliefs, chosen, PNT personality, caretaker, agreeable, empathy, codependence, triggered insecurities, difficulty trusting, fear of loss- high investment, binding, trapped-stuck, isolation, lack of understanding, shame-humiliation, INT personality, charming façade, and INT family of origin.

Please see Appendix D for the Code Hierarchies map.

Devolution

This main code encompasses what could be viewed as the beginning of the end of the relationship, a major turning point in the relationship in which cyclical patterns emerge. The actual ending for many participants would come years later, however, the curtain has been lifted on the gamut of personality traits and behaviors that the PNT could expect from their partner. The INT may be feeling more in control of the relationship at this stage, thus allowing their negative behaviors to become more overt. The cyclical behaviors start with heightened wooing, such as love bombing (carrot) followed by devolutions into negative or harmful behaviors (stick) designed to manipulate PNTs to continue in service of the INT. This is repeated with renewed behaviors designed to pull PNTs back into the relationship if they began to distance themselves. The devolution creates a trauma bond for the PNT which involves relationships with high intensity, high complexity, inconsistency, and hope created by false promises (Carnes & Phillips, 2019; Carver, 2011; Logan, 2018). Much of the greater detail of this code is explained in the subcodes below.

Façade Dropping. This subcode speaks directly to a balance shift in power wherein the INT feels comfortable with the level of PNT commitment and no longer feels compelled to maintain the initial façade they presented to the PNT, at least to the same degree. Often this was paired with a realization that PNTs are multi-faceted individuals who have needs and traits other than the superficial. Treatment of the PNT becomes more negative at that point. This behavior eventually reversed back for most participants at times when the balance of power shifted closer to center or the PNT seemed to be

backing away from the relationship. 27 of the participants recalled impactful moments of recognition.

For instance, Cecilia felt that her partner had decided that he no longer had to “woo” her since she was now invested:

We used to play a lot of games, that was kind of our thing, going to movies. In the beginning, it’s all new and fresh, he was doing what he had to do to rope me in. And then as soon as things got comfortable and we were living together, he just did whatever he wanted to do, whether I cared or not. I think he got comfortable. He had me, right? He had what he needed. We were then married within that two years and he didn’t have to try anymore.

For some, this became more about withdrawal; their partners no longer seemed to make time for them, or they felt less important than other things in the INTs’ lives. For many participants, including Una, it was gradual and therefore difficult to pin down, “There was more of a tendency for him to withdraw and to not put in those efforts into those conversations and to doing the romantic or fun things. That certainly was taken out over time.” Morgan described it like her partner was “checking a box”, that he started doing the “bare minimum” to preserve the relationship, and that while it started out as more of a covert thing, that it became much more obvious towards the end of the relationship.

He was very affectionate and open in the beginning. The first time I confronted him, I started to notice things changed after that. He wouldn’t want to open-up emotionally. It felt to me that he felt like he knew enough about me already and didn’t need to know more. It did seem like this is a strategy of just putting in the

bare minimum effort until he has to do something. I think that's how it felt after those first two months of our relationship. He's putting in the minimum effort to keep me there because he does want me there. (Wendy)

I remember there being a very distinct difference between the image that he modelled when people were around versus the way that he treated me in private. I remember meeting our neighbours for one of the first times we were getting together once we moved and having a glass of wine. The neighbour's husband rose to fill up my wine glass, and I watched my husband go, "Oh, don't worry. No, no, no. I'll get that for her. I just love running around for her and doing whatever she needs," and he got up and went in a flourish to get a glass of wine for me. He'd only clean the kitchen if his parents were around. He'd only play with his son if there were people watching. Otherwise, he was just doing his own thing. So, there was very clear disconnect between who he was and who he was trying to show people that he was. (Ani)

Nancy, as with many participants, identified that her partner began to behave as if he felt that he had impunity once she was committed, "Creating this life that I now wanted to protect, I feel like he knew, 'I can do whatever the fuck I want now. I've got her.'"

Many of the participants spoke about their partner seeming like a different person after engagement or marriage. Vanessa stated:

He was very affirming and encouraging about my role in his life, and it was almost like a sales pitch to get me to be with him and to be married. And then all of a sudden it was like, I bought the car, and it was over.

Robin speculated that INTs strategically won't let you see the negative behaviors until they are ready to. Like many of the participants, the flavor of the shift was heightened aggression and anger. "I remember later in the relationship is where it got significantly disruptive. He would pick a lot of fights with me over things that were really irrelevant."

Shifting Boundaries. This subcode includes information about the different ways that PNT boundaries may have gradually shifted over time. It became apparent in the data collection process that 24 PNTs struggled to normalize events in the relationship they wouldn't originally have believed they were comfortable with or willing to accept. Many of the INTs seemed to push at boundaries gradually by introducing regular hints much earlier on about uncomfortable activities, however, at times there was no warning. If manipulative tactics did not work, eventually the response became anger or withdrawal until the desired outcome took place (which will be discussed in subsequent codes). In some circumstances, PNTs expressed that this pushing of boundaries seemed to be a game for the INT to see how much they could get away with, rather than having any specific outcome in mind. The ability to shift boundaries perhaps relates to the agreeableness and flexibility that many of the PNTs reported about themselves.

Morgan compares the shifting of her boundaries to the Boiling Frog Fable (Grima et al., 2020) in which the frog is placed in a pot of cold water on a stove, and everything seems fine. Gradually however, the temperature increases, but the frog does not notice because it adjusts and acclimatizes with the slow change. Eventually the water is boiling and the frog has not jumped out, finally cooking to death. "I think the first year I would complain but over time, like the boiling frog theory. In hindsight, it's not really apparent

as to what happened.” Morgan identifies that even after some time and distance from the relationship, it is difficult to determine how she grew to accept the things she was not ok with. After the first year, she stopped complaining because it wasn’t effective for change. For Diana, her partner seemed to be testing how much he could get away with, “It was a constant but getting worse. He wasn’t being as secretive about it. It was like a game to him. How much can I put it in her face without her doing anything about it?” Kyla likewise noticed that after her boundaries were crossed and she expressed herself, she would eventually drop the matter, “And then we sort of just kept going, and I guess I backed down from this ultimatum, I just kept continuing the relationship.”

A few of the participants expressed that the INTs seemed to be trying to mold them into people that they were not, using covert value statements, and sometimes outright demands. For Claire this centered around what the INTs image of what a girlfriend ‘should be’ while for Megan, it was about her role in his life (which he would represent in different ways to different people), and her appearance, particularly body weight and composition.

He wanted to have a baby, and he already had the name picked out. But he wouldn’t do that with me unless I was able to get skinnier for him. Then I had all this pressure. And this is where the eating disorder was really, really bad.

Both participants indicated that they would go along with playing the role the INT had chosen for them.

Other participants also spoke about feeling forced into a position of betraying their own sense of values or moral codes. Valerie's boss, and soon-to-be partner would try in a variety of ways, first at work and then more overtly in personal life as well:

This would be a recurring theme in our relationship, where not only would he push my moral boundaries about how I should engage in sales. But some point, he would pitch the idea of us being in a polygamous relationship. And of course, it didn't come out very directly at first. He would complain about how he doesn't know what it's like to date many women because when he was young, he was focused on his academics, so he didn't have time to mess around. But then he would ask me about my experiences dating other men, and how I had an advantage over him in romantic relationships just because I had dated more people. So, while I didn't think those comparisons were fair, he would leverage that to convince me to be in a polygamous relationship with him, where he can go and meet other women. And I could do the same. It took awhile before he just fully came out and said, "I think we should be in an open-ended relationship where we're allowed to see other people." Before that, he would just talk about how, oh yeah, it's such a shame. It's such a regret of mine too...

Both Cecilia and Diana also described how over time their discomfort with certain sexual activities was ignored and their boundaries eroded by both subtle and overt pressure over time. In Cecilia's case, her partner threatened to cheat again if she didn't engage in a threesome, which she eventually did against her "better judgement".

Some of the PNTs explained that they were avoiding the backlash that would occur should they choose to push back and as a running thread throughout most of the transcripts, as boundaries were gradually moved further from center, it became much easier to normalize larger, more egregious behavior because PNTs had been long since acclimatized to many things that they would not have previously imagined accepting. Dorian described facing days of silent treatment if he brought up something that bothered him. Megan suggested she turned a blind eye to probable cheating to avoid being told she was wrong or that she was at fault somehow. Eleanor explained that it was easier to accede than to face extreme behavior, and because it felt like the “maze” was always changing, she took on subtle learning about how to keep the peace:

They kick something out their way, the way they slam a cupboard, the way they huff, puff, don't talk, withdraw. So you know that if you say no, you're going to experience that, and the thought of experiencing that with the brand-new baby, just felt like it was just so much easier to say yes.

The changing maze that Eleanor refers to is a reference to the randomness of experiences and responses that she recognized occurred in her relationship, which not only served to keep her off-balance, but created massive mental load in trying to anticipate the safest responses. This was a common sentiment expressed by many other participants as well.

Focus. This subcode reflects the movement of the focus of the relationship as a dyad and as individuals turning towards the INT interests and needs and away from that of the PNT. In 27 of the relationships, PNTs indicated that there was very little room for

them to think about themselves, to ask for their needs or wants, or to maintain a set of expectations.

Over half of the participants identified that activities they did as couple ceased to be collaborative, but became focused on what the INT enjoyed doing, and often PNT interests were dropped entirely. Ani pointed out that her partner was, “largely ambivalent about anything that didn’t have anything to do with him.” Kyla’s partner would claim that his activities were important to do and spend money on, while hers were not:

He would always need these sort of stress releasers. He’d need to be able to go out with his friends and go to the pub, or need to be able to go paddle boarding, or skiing, or whatever. And I think the idea was that my life was not as stressful, so I didn’t need that.

Jessica recognized what had happened in hindsight:

Whatever it is that he wanted – sometimes it would be twisted enough to make it look like it was also what I wanted. Some of the things were things that we enjoyed together but as I look back, a lot of it ended up becoming about what would work for him and for his needs or his agenda. It didn’t really seem like an agenda at the time.

Eleanor stated that she put her needs on the “back burner,” otherwise she risked her partner’s rage. Morgan spoke about the outcomes of the focus always being on her INT partner, “My life was just him. By the end, he would put no effort and I was putting 1000 percent in an effort to sustain it. And so, I was just drained.”

At least eight of the INT partners made it very clear to PNTs that they felt themselves to be more important than their partner. In a couple of cases, the INT failed to show up to the hospital during an important or life-threatening event so that they could play video games or hang out with friends. This focus on INT wants and needs also extended to conversations, “If we were talking about what he wasn’t interested in, wasn’t about him, or about the things that he wanted to talk about, he wasn’t particularly interested.” (Una).

When it came time to spend time with family and friends, at least nine of the PNTs noticed that their own support circles were becoming restricted in favor of spending time with the INTs’ social network. INTs ranged from simply not being interested in engaging with the PNT world to actively sabotaging the PNTs’ ability to do so, through expressing dislike, badmouthing, or creating logistical barriers. Ani noticed this one-sided focus right from the beginning, “When we first were dating, I would watch him play soccer and we would hang out with his friends. He was not involved in any of my interests or activities.” Whereas for Iris, the level of focus changed part way through the relationship, representing a turning point after their second child:

The second one came, that’s when it really started falling apart. Like the stuff with no privacy, vacations were always with [in-laws]. Everything was revolving around his family and his life and no longer mine or to do with me. I didn’t even have my own life.

Not only were activities, conversation, and time spent with supports focused around INT wants, but emphasis centered on the INT’s emotional realm. Ruby described that in her

relationship, she played the “role of cheerleader” for her partner. Una recounted a very difficult event where her partner turned the focus so that his needs became central:

I had experienced a rape. And, when I told him about that, it became, “I can’t hear about his because it’s too hard for me.” And I ended up comforting him around sharing this really traumatic experience in my life and he wasn’t able to show up there in those moments.

This one-sided focus was to the detriment of the PNTs in so many realms that PNTs reported feeling like they lost themselves and sometimes their mental health in the relationship, while being conditioned to focus on the INT. “I didn’t know who I was outside of him. My life was absorbed by his life.” (Vanessa)

Admiration. This is a subcode of ‘Focus’ where INT often required ego stroking from their partners. PNTs had to feed the narcissistic supply to avoid confrontations or blow-ups and to be careful to revolve around the INT’s emotional needs. INTs would take credit for other’s efforts or successes, including that of their partner’s. All participants mentioned moments in their relationships where they felt compelled to offer some form of admiration to that might not normally be expected in a relationship.

Iris offered an explanation for why she believed that admiration was an important focus in her relationship, and how interactions were positive as long as her INT partner had his narcissistic supply filled by her and those around him, “A narcissist needs pawns around them - in my case the kids, me, to feed the narcissist. Interaction between the Pawn and Narcissist can be positive or negative so long as the narcissist has the attention to the narcissist.” Dustin also discussed how his partner required regular appreciation,

that, “she was just this goddess who had to be worshipped”. Brooke classified this need for the narcissistic supply like a drug for her partner:

It’s like he’s sucking energy from people so he can give himself temporarily a little bit. But then he’s got to have another hit. It’s like being addicted to drugs. You get that high, but then once things are cruising and things are good and that person is happy, it’s not feeding what he needs. He needs to have that control, that power, that jolt of energy, that high.

Five of the participants discussed how they would listen and validate their partners on a regular basis. Madeline found that her relationship went more smoothly when she admired her partner and allowed him to feel like he was more intelligent than her. She indicated that the moment she had finally had enough of doing this, was when the relationship ended. Whenever something went wrong in the relationship, Dawn’s partner would let her know that she had done something wrong by “not supporting him enough” or “feeding his ego”. At these times, “blow-ups were inevitable”. Sophia noticed that her partner “dismissed” people who no longer wanted to give admiration. Megan said that her partner would keep her close when he was needing admiration, but would distance himself when he could receive admiration more easily from others:

He would have mental breakdowns where somebody would shame him, and he would lose it and need me to pamper him. And he would do weird things to get that to happen. Until he would find someone else who would become an advantage to him, and then he would start distancing himself from me.

A few of the participants addressed the idea that it seemed to be their role or “job” in the relationship to make their partners happy. Eleanor described that her partner was generally happy with the level of admiration that she could give him until her child was born, at which point her attention shifted. It was a turning point where she noticed her partner’s rage beginning, and her response was:

I just pedaled 10 times harder to meet the needs he had. Everything stayed pretty amazing as long as his needs were all met. Until that point he was the apple of my eye. Everything revolved around him. He was happy and when he wasn’t happy, it was my job to make him happy and that wasn’t a problem. I’m pretty good at it.

Four of the participants identified that the need for admiration seemed to be the motivation behind their partners’ affairs. According to the INT partners, if the PNTs weren’t willing to give the attention that the INTs felt they deserved, they would go elsewhere to get it (thus becoming the PNTs’ ‘fault’). For example, Mona explained that her partner needed constant boosting of his ego and that having children was a turning point in her relationship:

Once we started having kids, he started having affairs. Because he still needed that. Then when I had kids, I was not rolling a red carpet. R: It sounds like things started to go sideways when you couldn’t fill his tank? P: Yeah, and you couldn’t anyway. I’d told him that before, “It’s impossible. It’s never-ending. It’s never enough.”

Imbalance. This is also a subcode of ‘Focus’ indicating that the PNT is doing the larger balance of emotional and physical labour for the relationship and the household, including tasks and management. Additionally, this may indicate an imbalance of the power structure where PNT services are expected but that the INT does not feel the need

for reciprocation. The PNT may feel that they have no right to complain, that they need to try harder, and they may be shamed, or affection may be withdrawn as a tool used by the INT to promote the imbalance. 26 participants reported feeling an imbalance.

Almost all the participants who noticed an imbalance detailed that they were taking on the work for running the household. Robin specified:

He was just generally lazy. He didn't help around the house at all. I did all the chores. I was going to school, working full time, I took care of our dog, I did all the grocery shopping, I had to bring all the groceries in and put them away, I did all the laundry, and I did all the house cleaning.

If Robin took space to do schoolwork, her partner would yell that he needed leisure time to play his video games. Nancy conveyed this sense of imbalance as well:

It was always, "She needs to do all these things because I don't want to do them." I didn't know that I did all the things. I didn't acknowledge that I did all the things. It's an expectation almost. Like, "You keep the house running and I'm out here busy paying all the bills and making it all happen so that you can have all these things." I have a job. I do work fulltime as well.

Kyla discussed how she had quit her job at her partner's request and that much of their resources went to supporting his family while she was trying to figure out how to balance their own budget:

So he doesn't want me to work. There's nothing that I can do to make the situation better but be alone at home with a baby. Have no money, just all of the responsibility of figuring out how to make it work without any money. So, I lived

in this new city. I quit my job to work for him. I started spending all my time with his friends and not mine. And so, my life really was just revolving around him.

Yeah, so that's where I really felt it, is when we got really financially integrated.

Ani pointed out that she was still doing the majority of the relationship labour, even during a period while her partner was unemployed, "He didn't participate in the home at all. There was no cooking, there was no cleaning, there was no nothing. I would cook, I would clean, I would take care of our son, and he played videogames." Elise's partner would get angry if she asked for a contribution to the household, and there was an implication that it was her job to do these tasks:

I'd asked that he commit to driving our son to school [a few days]- he drove right by the school daily. His rage led to my realization for the first time, that he was intentionally avoiding responsibility and accountability, preferring to frame minor household contributions as a favour to me.

She felt like she was not responsible for anything in this relationship. It was always me who had to take care of her, her world, my world, everybody's world.

She was just this goddess who had to be worshiped. She would tell me this literally all the time, "My whole life, I've been told that I'm the most beautiful person on this planet." No interest in taking care of me, our house or anything of that sort. I would be running the whole show. I would be taking care of me. I would be taking care of her. I would be taking care of all the affairs outside the house. And I would be exhausted all the time. (Dustin)

Vanessa highlights this experience by saying:

It was very unilateral it felt like. The decisions were about him, his career, what he had to do, what he wanted, and what was best for him. I wanted to have a relationship where we could make the decisions together. And I started to see that that wasn't going to happen.

Some found themselves feeling responsible to manage partners' emotional state and most felt that they could not question the imbalance. Participants conveyed that decision making in the relationship was unilateral and all about the INT. Looking back at the imbalance, Mona questions her decision to stay in the relationship, saying "He helped with nothing. And he even told me that he felt no connection with the kids back then. And I stayed with him. Like what the hell?"

In summary, the devolution of the relationships occurred in some way for all the dyads. Participants felt that this was related primarily to their partners dropping pretenses of wooing and no longer putting the same kind of investment into the relationship that they had been led to believe would occur. Most participants found that their boundaries were gradually eroded as the focus of the relationships leaned more heavily in favor of service to the INT, requiring extra attention and work from the PNTs.

Emotionally Abused

This main code includes both covert and overt instances of emotional, psychological, and financial abuse. The National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) (2017) describes emotional abuse in this way:

It is a very effective tactic used by abusive partners to obtain power and control and it can cause extreme damage to the victim's self-esteem. Commonly,

emotional abuse makes the victim feel like they are responsible for the abuse and to feel crazy, worthless and hopeless. It is so damaging that many survivors of domestic violence report that they would have rather “be hit” than endure the ongoing psychic damage of emotional abuse.

Emotional abuse can include: constant put downs or criticisms, name calling, “crazy making”, acting superior, minimizing the abuse or blaming you for their behavior, threatening and making you feel fearful, isolating you from family and friends, excessive jealousy, accusing you of having affairs, and watching where you go and who you talk to.

The above definition from the NNEDV was found post-data collection yet encapsulated what emerged from the participants’ stories very accurately. It was clear that the PNT-INT dynamic is highly emotionally and psychologically abusive to the detriment of the PNT. This proved to be one of the main codes derived from the data and was woven throughout all the stories for most participants from beginning to end, intensifying and diversifying as time went on. 32 subcodes emerged from this code, demonstrating the magnitude of import for understanding the connection to the PNT-INT relationship dynamic.

For Dustin and Dorian, the most concerning common refrain was that their partners refused to take responsibility or accountability for anything, creating not only one-sided efforts, but also regularly indicating that everything that wasn’t working was their fault. Diana also felt blamed for everything, and her partner would use that type of assertion to manipulate her into doing things that she did not want to. Even her

understanding of her own feelings was challenged. Elise suspected that her partner used her as an “emotional clearinghouse” to work out and project his own issues at her expense. Nancy states, “It was literally in my face every single day, reminding me how shitty I was. And how incapable I was.” Megan gave an example of one of the ways her partner would treat her when he was displeased, which could be considered public shaming. He would throw her clothes off their balcony, and she would have to go to knock on the neighbors’ doors to retrieve her articles.

If there was any abuse, it would’ve been psychological. But he had me cowering in a corner, crying with my hands over my head, just sobbing, not knowing how to get away from him, from the situation, from just the craziness of his accusations. But there was no arguing with it because he was so adamant about it, and he was so intimidating with it. (Dawn)

In most of the relationships there was a mixture of both overt and covert abuse, however, a common narrative throughout the stories was that it often started very subtly and was very confusing in nature, but once more comfortable, the INTs would become more overt and the frequency and intensity increased. Madeline describes that the emotional abuse was layered with a façade of sweetness, making it difficult to interpret, “It’s like someone comes really close to you and gives you a kiss by the ear, but then they icepick [you] in the kidneys.” Tara spoke about how sarcastic remarks and criticism were couched by her partner as jokes. She feels that she might have caught on sooner if it wasn’t such a duplicitous way to put her down:

It's emotional abuse, but it's so subtle that it's very hard to describe to anybody else, just the insidiousness of it. The comments here, there. But he would always buy me really nice gifts so people would see I'd have a really nice ring on or something, and just "Oh, he's so kind to you. I wish my husband would buy me gift." So, I think always when we're dealing with anybody who's been through abuse, it's not always overt and it's that sneaky part of it that's really hard for the person to explain or be addressed.

She expressed gratitude that she doesn't think in the way that her partner does:

This woman had said that her husband had been really, really abusive and she'd never caught onto it that it was abusive. But she said, "I was really glad that I didn't catch onto it, because that meant that I wasn't that way, I didn't think that way, and that wasn't me." And just reading that statement was "Yes!"

Many of the participants voiced difficulty in making sense of or describing for others exactly what was happening in their relationships. A piece that made it especially challenging is that in describing many of the discrete events that occurred, it might not seem abusive or could be interpreted differently. However, it was the accumulation of events that added up to an erosion of the self and wellbeing. Some compared the experience of emotional abuse to physical in that unlike physical instances, there were few specific events that for certain indicated extreme danger. This coupled with subtly and gradually shifted boundaries and repeated INT challenges to PNT perceptions of events made it difficult to identify in many instances. As Dorian pointed out, there was no cuts and scrapes to see, everything is internal. Robin discussed the difficulty:

When you have somebody that's gone through physical abuse, they know. You know when somebody has hit you. You know when somebody has kicked you or punched you and you have bruises and you feel it, but when you go through a psychological thing like that, you don't know, because he did a really good job at making sure I didn't know, covering it up and making it fall on me. I think people don't fully understand the concept of psychological abuse in the sense of the hit the person takes to their own perception of things.

Eleanor addressed this type of abuse and mentioned that nothing prepares the average person to know how to deal effectively with emotional abuse when they encounter it:

I think what stands out for me most would be the cruelty. I didn't know it was going on. And you can't say, "Oh, look at this bruise. He hit me." Like there's nothing in our collective memory to prepare us for a pandemic, and there's nothing in your wheelhouse to prepare you for somebody that you love attempting to crush to meet their own needs, to suck the life out of you and then, beat you up at the end for not having more to give.

Participants noted that not having insight from outside sources made them second guess themselves and made it difficult to pinpoint. Cecilia found herself wishing for a final physical moment that she could point to so she could justify ending the relationship:

The sad thing about emotional abuse is that it's just not recognized the way physical abuse is. [There was] the time that he had me up in the basement and he had my head up against the wall and he had his fist to my face, I looked at him and was like, "Do it." I was ready to take that hit because all I could think is,

“That will get him out of the house.” I was justifying being beaten because it was the only way I could get validated, that people would understand what’s going on. The old saying of “Sticks and stones may break my bones”, like really? What he did to me, tore me to pieces. And I still am trying to put those pieces back together. And it’s hard. It’s a life-long battle.

Kyla believed that her partner was quite strategic to keep his emotional abuse from looking overt so that he could manipulate her into getting what he wanted from the relationship. Nancy said she believes her trauma to be akin to a physical abuse survivors but is saddened to know that the court system offers little to no protection.

The fact that that whole system is so set up... “I wasn’t abused until he threw me down a flight of stairs” sort of thing. You don’t need to verbally be threatened. I think this is so much more pervasive, and hidden, and damaging that I think that’s a big part of it. (Mia)

As Iris points out, it takes years sometimes to collect evidence, not only to grasp oneself, but for the court system which requires a list of ongoing conflict situations. Even the people around the dyad may or may not believe or understand what is going on.

Push-Pull. This subcode of ‘Emotional Abuse’ describes the extreme ebb and flows of the PNT-INT dynamic. Participants described a dramatic distinction between the positive peaks and negative valleys based on INT behavior, the atmosphere of the relationship, with an extreme sense of unpredictability. This resulted in confusion, anxiety, a feeling of walking on eggshells, a need to try harder, as well as many cases of multiple breakups. Participants identified that the cycle of wooing and abuse was

addictive. The INTs would woo when they felt the PNT slipping away (a loss of control), and responded by love-bombing or grand promises, for example. 22 of the participants addressed feeling the push and pull (wooing and withdrawal).

In the early days, there was a lot of talking about, “Hey, you’re so smart.” And you know, “We have so much in common. It’s so great, I can have really good deep conversations with you. This is wonderful.” And, “You’re beautiful.” There was lots of that coming from him. And even then, there was an element of retreat at times too. Like he would go on a business trip and just not get in touch during that time. So, there was that element of, “I’m here when I’m here but when I’m gone, you’re out of my head.” Which, I think, actually kind of brought on a little bit of that –the chaser and the pursuer kind of thing. (Una)

He would heavily pursue and then I would show interest, and then he would pull away. And then it would make me want to go more, and then he’d pursue if I was like, “okay, no”. Kind of like a back and forth. So, when we started dating it was very hot and cold. He would do lots of nice things to make me feel that he cared about me. He made me cards for my birthday or Valentine’s Day. He’d give me flowers randomly. He’d make food for me. We’d go and do things together that were just me and him. And then all of a sudden, I wouldn’t hear from him for a few days. He’d do lots of nice things, and then he’d kind of take it away. (Diana)

Ruby found that her partner would stop avoiding her the minute he needed something. Nancy described it like a cycle of punishment and treats, fighting and caretaking, and then forgetting the issue. Madeleine believed her partner would sense her pulling away,

would make grand gestures to pull her back, and then get mad at her again and the cycle would continue all over. Claire said she was on the verge of breaking up at least once a year, “Towards the last couple of years I was definitely more sure that I was actually going to leave this time, because there were many moments where I tried breaking up with him and it didn’t work.”

Walking on Eggshells. This is a subcode of the ‘Push-Pull’ subcode which indicates an outcome of unpredictable or surprising reactions by the INT. INT’s might pick irrelevant or inconsistent fights which could create a state of confusion and anxiety for the PNT. The PNTs may spend their time tiptoeing around the INT’s (often volatile) emotional state. 22 participants reported experiencing this.

Some of the participants found that their partners would respond with outsized reactions to smaller, insignificant things and would be extremely unpredictable in their response, occasionally acting with rage, withdrawal, or alternately, business as usual.

I’m trying to scale in my mind, his response would be a ten but what I said would be a two. So, I would have triggered something or hit on a very sore spot for him, but my comment would have been, like, “I’m not a fan of that sweater”. And it would have been like I insulted his being. (Claire)

You’re in a relationship, and this person just turns on a dime. They’re reasonable, and then all of a sudden something sets them off. The blow-ups were inevitable. There was always going to be something you did wrong, you didn’t support him enough, didn’t feed his ego enough. Sometimes they would build and you would

see it coming. Other times it wasn't a quick anger. It was more of a manipulated slow burn to fury. (Dawn)

Brooke highlights the emotional damage that can occur in such a relationship:

I read a saying the other day that totally stuck with me that being a child of a narcissistic parent is like living in a war zone. You never know what's going to hit, or the mood, or the time. There's no real rhyme or reason to anything. Being in that relationship is the same.

Many of the PNT partners would find themselves being very careful about their INT partners' reactions and placating them so as not to provoke difficult reactions. Rita described having to pick her timing, watching her tone, and how she presented information. She found ultimately that changing herself made no difference to the reactions. Nancy knew that bringing any problems up to her partner would mean being treated poorly for many days on end:

If I was concerned about something, if we were having a disagreement, I wanted to point something out that wasn't making me happy, or that I was concerned about, it was very much a walk on eggshells. Nobody pisses him off because if you piss him off, you would pay for it in some way, shape, or form. It's like the danger zone. I'm going in. I've got my hazmat suit on. I know this is going to be shitty and I know I'm going to be treated like garbage for the next few days.

Some participants described how post-breakup they are still experiencing post-breakup the scars from living with the ongoing fear of repercussions from their partners:

It makes me feel like even to this day ... I have this really weird sense that I'm fucking up and I don't even know I'm fucking up as I do life. Everything that feels instinctively right to me, could possibly be wrong. Which is what kept me in the relationship because I was, like, "Am I the crazy one?" I don't want to be crazy. I don't want to do something rash and crazy or blow up my world because I'm reacting to something. (Elise)

And it's hard because I'm trying to placate him still because I don't want to fight with him, and I want to get along with him. And it's the same when you're in the relationship. You're tiptoeing around, you don't know how to deal with them, and you're so trying to keep their reactivity at bay but still be true to yourself. (Mona)

I always felt like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. I still live with this unrelenting fear all the time, "it's good right now but what's going to happen?" Extreme anxiety, fear of... I did something really well, but it's not going to be okay or enough. I'm trying to work it out. Those are the scars and I realize I lived the whole relationship feeling like I'm going to let him down again. (Vanessa)

Anxiety. This is also a subcode of 'Push-Pull' based in the unstable nature of the PNT-INT dyad, and the ever-present threat of repercussions such as manipulation, withdrawal, or rage. Not knowing what was coming next in terms of INT behavior or how to prevent poor behaviors was linked to this reported state of anxiety. 18 PNTs reported new or worsening anxiety which developed during their relationship.

"You asked about what characterized the relationship, I would say the sense of anxiety." (Una) Eleanor conveyed that she felt smothered all the time, and she developed

autoimmune and breathing issues which stopped when her INT partner was no longer around. Dorian ended up taking medication for his anxiety symptoms related to the uncertainty around his partner's mood state once he arrived home after work:

I was on anxiety meds because I'd drive home from work and I could feel the stress starting to build in my chest, and it was crushing. Because it was "Who am I getting when I get home? I have no idea." Every day was different.

Three participants asserted that they ended up in the emergency room due to panic attacks while with the INT, "At the time a lot of my anxieties were a result of his anger issue. It's so ridiculous how I landed myself in... well, how I was having anxiety attacks. But these days, no anxiety attacks." (Valerie) Elise started to get panic attacks six months after beginning her relationship:

R: So, it sounds like he was undercutting you? P: Yeah, very early. And that's why I ended up having the panic attacks because I started to doubt my every move. I didn't realize it, but I was trying to figure out what was wrong with me. It was weird stuff, and it would come out of nowhere. But because I thought he was better than me and more stable than me, it was of course, this is me being wrong.

A few of the participants spoke of the anxiety of waiting for their partners or worrying about them when they weren't at home, connected to the heightened focus that revolved around the INT and an unstable connection.

Most of the time when I wasn't with him, I was very anxious and I was very focused on him. What stands out to me most is that feeling of anxiety that was present as an undercurrent through the whole relationship. It obviously lessened when I was

with him and in certain situations. It was unique I would say. The relationships before that I had had issues with doubts. I had doubted myself whether I wanted to be with this person. But I never felt that it was unstable, and I never felt that I needed them too much. But in this relationship the anxiety was driven by the fear that he would leave, because he would often not communicate with me for certain periods of time. And he also was the first person that I hadn't felt any doubt about, that I knew I wanted to be with. (Wendy)

Even after the relationship ended, several participants found themselves struggling with chronic anxiety, enough that they would avoid reminders and locations that might expose them to, or trigger thoughts of their INT partners.

Confusion. This is a subcode to 'Walking on Eggshells' and 'Anxiety' because this was a state that 17 PNTs often identified experiencing because of deep uncertainty that they were feeling around the INTs actions. Even without the experience of anxiety, at times confusion existed for some participants attempting to make sense of the events of the relationship and continual uncertainty.

Participants were confused by the feeling that they should not stay in the relationship, and versions of this sentiment were expressed across the board. While in the thick of the relationship, participants instinctual selves were often letting them know that something was very wrong, but they found it hard to pinpoint just what was going on. Ava identified that her partner would twist things around so much any time she brought up an issue or a feeling that she would no longer know how to make sense of it. Tara felt that what made things extra confusing is that there were very good times, and that her

partner could be so sneaky in the ways that he used emotional abuse. Vanessa felt she could not grab the truth and that her head would “start swimming”. Iris explained similar feelings and added that part of this came from the sense of blame in her relationship. Everything was her fault according to her partner, and it just wasn’t completely adding up. Ultimately, she felt that she couldn’t “even understand this anymore”.

I hung up the phone feeling like I had just been spun around and dropped and I had no idea which way was up. I moved to my mother’s for two weeks before I could come up with the words to say or to make that decision to leave permanently. I couldn’t do that living there. I was living in this washing machine, like this strange blender of confusion about not really trusting myself and my own instincts and my own reality. (Jessica)

Jessica’s description addresses the difficulty that participants had in vocalizing just what exactly was not feeling right about their relationships. Madeline said about her partner, “I couldn’t even verbalize what was going on because he was very polite. He never, ever swore. He was just very, very charming.” Robin developed more clarity because of what other people were confirming for her:

It’s a weird thing to explain, but I didn’t really see it as abuse, because it was so manipulative in the sense of “I’m just joking. You’re not understanding what I’m meaning. That’s not what I said. You don’t know what I said, you can’t repeat it.” I always was like “Maybe I’m not accurate”, so I never really thought it was abusive. It wasn’t until people came forward and were like “Just so you know, this is what he’s saying behind your back.”

Several participants addressed the intentionality of the confusion they were feeling.

Now I realize that the confusion was intentional, that's so cruel. It's hard to wrap your brain around. "I need to keep you confused and down and crushed and worthless because if you don't feel that way, you might catch on." I was watching this thing that Trump released today about his interview with Leslie Stall. It's so fascinating because here's very bright, very articulate, very well spoken, top of her game reporter who's no slouch, she's used to asking questions, she's used to thinking on her feet and at one point in the interview, she is so discombobulated. And you can hear she's confused by her own discombobulation and she can't quite put her finger on why or what to do or how to get out of it. And that's the issue. That stuff is healing for me because, "Okay, it's not that I was weak or stupid, we're all confused when somebody behaves this way. We should be confused. We should be discombobulated." (Eleanor)

She made the important point that the average person is not wired to truly understand the motivations and behaviors of an INT, and that is actually a positive thing. Elise cited confusion as one of the biggest reasons as to why she stayed so long in her relationship.

Controlled. This is a subcode of 'Emotional Abuse' and is representative of the INT asserting their decisions over the needs and wants on the PNT in a patterned way. PNTs may feel that their ability to make choices in their relationships, work, or households has been removed. Personal freedom is restricted. This may include requirements for the way things are done, for checking in regularly with the INT in a way that creates a double standard, and excuses for preventing INT choices. The INT may use

tools to reinforce control such as pressurized covert statements or suggestions, judgement, demands, manipulation, intimidation, anger, and threats. This is one of the largest codes of the data set in terms of volume of data, and all participants reported some elements of control in their relationships, the majority of which were in multiple realms.

Most of the participants spoke about how many aspects of the relationships revolved around their partner's requisites, or else PNTs would face highly reactive consequences as a result. Una stated, "Everything was always on his terms. That's what I would say one of the hallmarks is everything on his terms". For example, participants spoke about having to answer their partner's calls no matter what they were doing:

It wasn't long before I realized there was a lot of control in the relationship. It became more about what time he wanted to call me and that I needed to be up to take his call. And sometimes that meant 5:00am. If I wasn't available to take that call, I was berated for being lazy, not loving him. (Brooke)

Eleanor's partner was livid at interruptions even as she was caretaking their small kids. Rita's partner would interject himself into her plans by making sure things happened a certain way. On one occasion he locked her out of the house in the cold with no jacket or phone after she returned home from her bachelorette party, she believed, because he wasn't the focus. She said he couldn't seem to understand why she was angry. "So, he locked me out of the house a week before the wedding. What do you do with that information? You sort of go, "I know something is really wrong and I know I love this person." Elise felt that she had to report back to her partner about her activities, however, he did not do likewise. He would undermine her assessment of things and she believed he

was controlling the use of her time. Morgan talked about even the smallest things being controlled by her partner if it didn't fit into his plans:

It was just basics. "I need to go to the washroom." "I am in a rush, we need to get home, you can go when you go home." "The drive is two hours, can you pull over?" Oh my God, if someone tells you they need to go to the washroom, you pull over at a gas station and let them go to the washroom. Me asking him to pull over the car became like I was demeaning. Something was wrong with me to ask him to go – why didn't I do this before? Because I was getting in his schedule. I wanted to sell my apartment and buy something else, and he was not going to participate in that. Or, when I wanted to go to work, he literally wouldn't even hold the baby so that I could write a new resume or go on job interviews and stuff like that. He wouldn't do it in this way that was overtly abusive or domineering, but he was very careful about it almost. No one would ever have looked in and thought, this is an abusive dynamic. My whole family didn't know. I didn't tell them the kind of stuff that we did. But the way that he is behind closed doors is always very different from the way that he is in public. (Kyla)

Kyla also found that her partner strategically dominated larger decisions and tried to make this seemed balanced by allowing her wins on small things that weren't important to him. She believes that her partner learned this behavior from modelling in his family of origin through a similar pattern set up by his parents:

He decided that he wanted his kids to be a year and a half apart. So, when our baby was less than a year old, we were going to start trying for another one. I

didn't want to because I knew if I had another baby with him, I would be even that more isolated or distanced from being able to get out. He decided that was our plan. I wasn't going to work, I wasn't going back to school, I was going to take care of our kids the way that his mom did. And that was it. He would assert his dominance in stuff that really matter to him. So, I think a lot of people didn't really see it because it was sort of this covert sort of thing.

Over half of the participants spoke about how their partner would control their mutual living space (five participants never lived with their partners). For example, Madeline was not allowed to have plants or pets because her partner didn't like them.

He would control what I could wear. I wasn't allowed to eat certain foods. I ended up developing a very significant eating disorder very quickly. Then he took my key fob away for our building so I couldn't get in. I would have to call him. I can't get into our house. Which, by the way, I was not allowed to have evidence of living there. My stuff had to stay in a suitcase in the closet. If it didn't fit behind that side of the closet, it wasn't allowed to be there. No pictures, none of my things, no trinkets, no anything. So, there's no evidence that I was ever there. I wasn't allowed to have people over. I wasn't allowed to do anything. Also, he put out a hiring post. To do that, he put my contact number on it. So obviously all [industry people and my employer got it] and it's from me. And I was in [EU country]. I didn't even know this was happening. So, I got fired in flight on the way back. He was, like, "You're screwed. You're stuck with me." (Megan)

Over half of the participants spoke about being restricted socially in some way by their partner. Several INTs would use jealousy as a tool to keep their partner from speaking to whole groups of people (such as the opposite sex). For Kyla, this was often about making herself available to her partner at his convenience. Mia found that at school her partner could not control who she was around anymore and on at least one instance threatened to take away her means of leaving. He has tried to keep control even after separating. Morgan's partner would feign illnesses so that she would caretake him instead of going out and she realized in hindsight that he had faked it all. Megan was not allowed to live with her male roommates anymore yet wasn't allowed to take any ownership of their condo together. During the breakup, she was banned by him from talking about what had happened with them and their business, and he took all her technology, including private items. Dawn stated that the jealousy her partner showed when she had any contact with males was overwhelming. She was not allowed to go out without permission, and he prevented her from going to an important work meeting out of town.

I never did anything without talking to him despite him being never around, I would still ask him, "Hey, I'm thinking I might go out with so and so. What do you think?" Always asking permission. And I didn't even know it. It's gross to me, to know that I asked him permission to see my friends or go out with somebody. He would repeatedly tell me in our argument/conversation/discussions, "Okay, well we're done now." And that was that. And if I said anything else, he's just going to walk out the door. (Nancy)

Ava's partner used more subtle tactics like expressing dislike, in particular for her friends, which led to less contact over time due to awkwardness. Dorian stated that his partner would "lose her mind" if he wanted to spend time out of the home and would sometimes pretend there was some sort of crisis so he would come back early. She would require him to show her his phone even though he had never done anything untoward.

A few of the participants described how their partners would put things in their way so that they could not achieve life goals or a fully realized lifestyle. For example, Dawn could not even ask her partner to hold their baby for an hour so she could go to the gym otherwise he would be "furious". Ani called these moments "speedbumps" put in front of her by her INT partner:

I said, "Okay, I've sent all my applications off for my master's degree." "Oh, no. I got a job in [different city]. We're moving." I said, "But we discussed (a) not moving, and (b) what do you mean you got a job in [city]? You didn't even tell me you have an interview for a company. I don't even know what's happening." "No. We move in three weeks. So put the house up for sale. We're going." So I was like, "Okay." Looking back, "You're limiting me. You're trying to make sure that I don't get to pursue." And I moved out to [city], "Okay, I'm going to apply for master's again." "Oh, no. Now we're moving back to [home city]. We can't. You can't possibly do that. You can't. Got to move back to [home city]."

There was a sense from some PNTs that certain elements of control were about the INT grasping for a feeling superiority over their partner, which required diminishing them.

Now I can see what was happening, but it was very much a situation where I was not allowed to see how capable, strong, and valued. It was never acknowledged, “Oh my gosh, thank you so much for taking care of the house. You’re doing such a great job. And I’m sorry.” I don’t need a cheerleading squad. It’s nice every once in a while, but there was no acknowledgement of any of the things. (Nancy)

Coercively Controlled. This is a subcode of ‘Controlled’ and is a more extreme version, in that PNT boundaries are seriously pushed against and there is acute pressure and manipulation over time to do something that was not formerly ok with the PNT. This may include threats, intimidation, humiliation, limiting access to finances, and sexual discomfort as tools to promote INT interests and to increase dominance. Almost half of the participants reported more extreme control of this nature.

This colored a myriad of PNT-INT interactions, however, many of the instances are covered under other codes, therefore, the examples below are a mere sampling of highlighted forms of coercion that occurred. Brooke spoke about her partner’s threats to tell their boss about their affair (with the assumption that she would be the one fired). He had possession of a video that he threatened to leak if she did not comply. Once she had moved on, he continued to threaten to expose the affair to her new partner. Jessica indicated frequent coercion around finances, straining her own savings in the process. Megan was continually and covertly pushed to become thinner, using suggestion, comparison, and critique until she developed an eating disorder and continued in spite of the disorder. Madeline’s partner would push on her to try hard drugs, and Iris’s would threaten violence and restrain her from leaving when he wasn’t getting his way.

Two of the participants had decided that they did not want to have children or another child, however, their partners pressured them into doing so anyway, massaging the concept over time, “I have a 15-year-old who I raise on my own now, and I never wanted children. That to me is bonkers that he was able to convince me of that.” (Ani)

He just says, out of the blue one day, “I know you don’t want kids, but I’m really curious as to the process by which you come to that conclusion. Because it’s not like you to not take on an adventure, and to not want to live life to the fullest.” He says, “How do you know you don’t like kids if you’ve never had one? You don’t like other people’s kids. That’s okay. But given that everybody really does fully feel that it is the most amazing thing to ever do in your life, why would you cut yourself off from that?” I sat there for three months that just spun. “Well, because I just don’t have any urge to.” But that spun. “Why would you not open yourself up to the opportunity? Why would you block yourself to that adventure?” Because he said, “One of the most amazing things in the world is the adventure of having children.” It’s FOMO – fear of missing out. He totally used that on me. So, after three months, I figured I had the best conclusion. “I can try to get pregnant, and if it doesn’t work, it’s not meant to be. The universe said no,” because none of my friends could get pregnant. “I’m 39 years old. What are the chances? It’s probably going to be near to impossible. So, I won’t block myself from the adventure of having children, but I’ll pull the goalie and see what happens.” In a month, I got pregnant. (Dawn)

At least four participants experienced serious sexual coercion. In Diana's case, her partner perpetrated a sexual assault, and at other times brought people into their sexual activities without her consent. Cecilia was threatened with cheating if she did not go through with the activities.

Conditioned. This subcode of 'Controlled' indicates a powerful form of operant conditioning that takes place based on the intermittent cycle of rewards and punishment that appear to be inherent to the PNT-INT dynamic. In this dynamic, it data emerged that emotional abuse is intermingled with sporadic moments of attention and care, which caused the PNT to exert themselves harder and harder to bring the relationship back to the more loving part of the cycle. 19 participants mentioned moments of feeling conditioned into certain patterns of behaviors that were at the behest of their partners, and that they may not have otherwise done in a relationship.

For example, Megan expressed that she had been conditioned to take on her partner's viewpoints with no tolerance for feedback. Eleanor felt that she was conditioned to always say yes, so that her partner would be happy, and she would not receive some version of punishment. She compared it to a changing maze; she was doing her best to keep peace in the face of her partners unpredictable behaviors. Diana discussed that she had been conditioned not to trust herself and pointed to the punishment or withdrawal that her partner would use. He would spend time doing nice things only to then take it away again, often using silent treatment. Cecilia felt that she was conditioned to put her needs secondary, to expect nothing from her partner, and to keep her needs to herself:

Looking back, I realize we travelled where he wanted to go. We did what he wanted to do. My needs were always put on the back burner. I actually conditioned myself to believe that what I needed out of any part of life was on the backburner. It didn't matter. I became very programmed to believe that this is my stuff and men don't need to hear it.

Claire pointed out that these messages were all very "subtle".

Some participants learned to accept or ignore their partner's negative behaviour so as not to upset them. Morgan felt that partner was planting seeds that his needs were more important and pushing on her boundaries so that he could set up his ability to cheat:

Three-year mark, suddenly one day he just ghosted me. Made a big deal out of a very minor fight and he kept shouting this and that. I went to his place. He didn't open the door. That was probably the first time knowingly that he was testing the boundary of cheating. Then he was gone for a week. I can totally see the timeline in play. The first time around he tested it for the week. The second time around, three weeks. By then I couldn't sleep. I was not eating. I couldn't even drink water because my stress levels were— my esophagus actually stopped working.

Nancy spoke about how if she "rocked the boat" her partner would take away "fun" things and/or leave so that she was lonely. She felt that she was conditioned to "get on with it" and suppress her needs. She spoke about how the cycle of training made her feel like she deserved poor treatment:

He would work out of town longer. I see it now as a very sick game in the sense that for him to think this, "Oh, this girl loves me. I've made sure that she knows

that she loves me. When something doesn't go quite right or she wants to bring something up to rock the boat, I will make sure that she misses me more." It was almost like a tangible bait. He would use being on the road as a form of currency or punishment to condition me. I can acknowledge, I can label and recognize now, but in the moment, I had no clue. "She's alone in that house. I'll just stay on the road longer then, she'll miss me, and she'll just wash whatever that was under the bridge, and all will be fine again." I learned to do that. It's always the same phrase, pattern of words, all the same to literally mind-fuck you. To brainwash you. You hear something enough; I believed that I wasn't worth anything.

Dustin felt that his partner would use disapproval and rage to condition him, and Dorian cited the "silent treatment" and rage, "If I voice my opinion and say, "Hey, when you did this, it bothered me," the reaction to that was rage and then silent treatment for days. Oh, it's devastating. Devastating. The silent treatment, that's her go-to." Una felt that she had been steadily conditioned to focus on the INT experience, and that was prevalent:

I was always waiting for the end to come. He never used that as, "If you're not doing this or that, this will end." But it was always a silent threat of, "This will end." That really pervaded the whole relationship – not something that I've noticed a lot in my current relationship.

Manipulated. This is an aspect of "Controlled", experienced by all participants.

The INT would use their influence to sway the PNT into behaving in ways that served the INT, to the detriment of PNTs. This would often take the form of covert suggestions, comments, and putdowns designed to change behaviours. Manipulations exploited the

vulnerabilities, kindness, agreeableness, or flexibility of the PNT. However, many INTs would also use overt hostility when subtlety was not effective or when PNTs pushed back. This game playing with the PNTs' emotions, life, and psychological headspace often resulted in difficulties in trusting feelings and a belief that the INT was correct.

Megan spoke about her partner manipulating things right from the first date so that he could get her alone without her identifying what his plan was. She realised much of this was so her partner could keep her in his control:

I remember having that gut feeling, "Is this bad?" the whole time. But he's very persuasive, almost like he could read it in my face and then tell me a little bit of what I might be worried about, then validate that and turn it around, at the beginning. Very good at manipulating and really making you feel like you were the greatest thing. Knowing him now and how he operates with everybody, he's very goal oriented. How am I going to get this person to be under my thumb?

He's very good at it.

In Ani's case, her partner wanted her to perform a certain role in their household that did not fit for her, however he presented it as if it was a "gift" to her rather than a demand:

He told me things like wives were supposed to be home cleaning and cooking, and that he didn't want me to have to work. But he would always share that information as if it was an offering he was giving me. So, it wasn't as if he was telling me that I had to stay home and be a good housewife. It was that he was offering me this wonderful opportunity to be a stay-at-home parent.

Most of the participants talked about how strategic their partners could be in their manipulations and how this got worse as time went on in the relationship. Manipulations were the strongest when the INT wanted something. Dawn's partner would use guilt by complaining that he gave up his life to move to her country, so that every time he wished to try a new thing, she would buy it for him (such as a plane). She also spoke about how skilled he was about subtly planting ideas of what he wanted, but not pushing too far:

I've said to my mom, "He's the only man on the planet manipulative enough to have made me decide to have a child." He never approached things with head on, "Hey, we should have kids," or something like that. It was always this planned manipulation. The man is brilliant. Somebody needs to write a book on his manipulation skills. He would plant the seed and massage it but not press it.

Claire spoke about her partner laying traps for her by telling her he wanted her to behave in certain ways, but then would put her down for that behavior. "The brainwashing and manipulation. I always thought I was a smart girl. But it doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter. These men are very good at their craft, you know?" (Cecilia) Like others, Megan's partner admitted that he was aware of his manipulative abilities after they separated, "He said something to the effect of, "You don't think I know that all I have to do to get you back is just show up at your door? I could have you back in a second."

Aside from passive-aggressive suggestions, pushing gently, bluffing, silence, intimidation, withdrawal, blame, and rage, some INTs would try to make their partners jealous, play the victim, threaten harm to themselves, or use their children as leverage to get their own way. Megan's partner would regularly compare her to his bikini-model ex,

Dorian's partner would flirt heavily with other men in attempts to make him jealous and then get angry at him for expressing upset. Diana related how her partner would act so sad and would talk about how nobody likes him to play on her empathy and to overlook his behavior. Two of the INTs faked having cancer to manipulate their partners more long-term. Both Robin and Dawns' partners threatened suicide if they did not do as the INT wanted. Elise's partner used their child's emotional state as leverage to try to keep her in the relationship, and she states to this day in their interactions as co-parents, she usually only catches his manipulations in retrospect.

Many of the most intense moments of manipulation took place in the slide towards the final moments of the relationship, perhaps as a way of gaining control:

It became very manipulative at the end, where it went from gifts, cards, to, "well, if you really want to be with me, buy that golf club for me, otherwise I'm going to go talk to our boss." And the sad part is I would. Once I started telling him that it was done, he claimed that there was a letter in his mailbox saying that somebody that knew about us and that they were going to come clean about it. To this day I believe it was made up because he saw me getting some strength and power at that time. And I think that was his way to regain control and power. (Brooke)

Kyla's partner tried to convince her support system that something was wrong with her once she told him she was leaving:

When I told him I didn't want to be with him anymore, he was really emotional, crying. But he got really angry. He went to my friends and family, "Something's wrong with her. I think she's going to hurt herself. She's really unwell. She

probably has postpartum depression,” which I did not. They all came to me really concerned, “What’s going on? Are you going to try to kill yourself?” I said, “No, I’m trying to leave him. I’m trying to get out of this relationship.”

Diana spoke about her new understanding of the manipulation, “I learned a lot about myself in the sense of how easily manipulated I can be and how broken I was.”

Gaslit. This is a subcode of “Manipulated” all participants reported and denotes assertions that the INT might make that distort the truth and challenge PNT perceptions and feelings about events. PNTs might be accused of taking things out of proportion, that they are too sensitive, that they are wrong about what happened or how they felt, or that the INT was not to blame. This often was a precursor to PNTs questioning themselves and their reality and failing to trust their instinctual selves and others.

Some participants spoke about how their partners would challenge their demeanors or their own emotional or mental states. Madeline’s partner, like others, repeatedly tried to convince her that she had a ‘diagnosis’, with the subtext being that was the source of their problems. She gave him the benefit of the doubt over this:

He keeps calling me depressed. I wasn’t depressed. I’ve been depressed when I was younger. I know what it looks like. That happened a couple times, then I started to doubt myself, thinking, “I should have more faith in the relationship”

Dorian was accused of having a temper, something that he knew not to be correct:

She would say, “Even your friends agree with me. Even your friends say you’ve got a temper.” And I start asking my friends, “Did you guys say that?” They’re

like, “No, because you don’t. You’re one of the more level-headed guys here about things. You don’t get worked up. You don’t get angry about things.”

Rita gave a classic example of her partner gaslighting her in steps:

I’m going to give a stupid example: “Dry cleaning has to be done because I’m doing a conference presentation on Saturday. I can’t get there while they’re open.” “I’ve got it. I’ll do this for you.” Then, a) he wouldn’t do it; b) I was completely right about the consequences, exactly what was going to happen, happened. And c) I would say, “Oh my God, you didn’t do it.” He’d say, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Right now, I’m almost going to cry because that was so much of my experience. His ability to lie and believe the lie was horrifying. If I screamed at him and pressed it, he would maybe say, “I said I’d try to do that, but I didn’t say I’d do it.” And, I’d say, “That thing was the linchpin of this entire plan. Trust me. If you’d said “I’ll try to do it but no promises”, I would have remembered that. I was only reassured because you put your hands around my shoulders, you looked me in the eyes and said, I got it. I’ll do it. I promise I will take care of it.” “No, no, no.” And he would completely deteriorate and refuse, and that happened 500 times. When I read gaslighting, I just about vomited because it broke me. Had me doubt my perceptions and then, he couldn’t believe that I would be upset about because that’s not what he had said. And if I called him on that, he would say, “No, no, that didn’t happen.

Participants who spoke about gaslighting in their relationships described that their partners indicated that they should not be upset by INT behavior, that the PNT was

making things up, that the PNT was wrong, or was actually the problem. Megan explained that even her partner breaking up with her was framed as for her benefit.

He'd make me feel I shouldn't have a problem with it. I always was "Oh, he's right, I shouldn't be upset over him going", but that wasn't why I was upset. He changed my perception of what was actually happening. (Robin)

She would be told that her perceptions were wrong when her partner wanted his own way on things and she would give him the benefit of the doubt far too much. Diana was told similar things by her partner, that she was making things up and others could not be trusted. Vanessa was told that she was "too sensitive" and that she was "overreacting":

I was the butt of everyone's jokes. "Oh, Vanessa, she did this again." I still feel like I'm the butt of the jokes. I'm the one who's always this, always that, overreacting, or I'm histrionic. I eventually get so upset I'd snap and then it'd be making fun of being dramatic. But all my insecurities that I believed were happening, actually happened. I found them all out after, so I wasn't wrong in suspecting what I was suspecting. But he still smells like roses. It messes with your head, thinking, "it was me; he only did those things because I wasn't enough". It goes around and around to the point it's crazy making.

I would be told that I was too sensitive, or that he never said what he said, or that he was only joking. That I was just too serious and that's not what he meant, or he just totally forgot the whole thing completely. Then it would just be a repeat of the same pattern. I was too anxious, and I was too sensitive, and I was too

whatever, and it was me who had the problem. But I would watch other couples, so I saw a difference. (Tara)

At one point when Robin had been talking to a male friend in a bar, her partner tried to convince her that she was too drunk to be there, and that she said and did things that she knew she did not. He made her spend the night in the bathroom and forced her to try to throw up even though she did not feel sick. When she confronted him to express her views about it, he responded, “We’re not talking about this.” And then that was it.

Vanessa said that because it was hard to identify the gaslighting in the moment, she began to question herself and her perceptions and wonder if she was making things up:

I never had proof on the tip of my tongue. He’s, like, “see, you’re just making it up”. I’d feel he’s putting me down or he’s harbouring some kind of grudge and I can’t put my finger on it. And I bring it to his attention, and then it was always in my head. “Maybe it is in my head?” Then I’d start to question my own sanity.

Cecilia’s partner was so skilled at gaslighting that even when she found proof of her partner’s cheating, he justified it away, turning it into a “blowout” with her ending up apologizing for being “paranoid” and begging him not to leave. Ani was accused of cheating when it was actually her partner who was. She felt that she was in the wrong:

I know now I was being gaslit, but at the time I thought I was doing something wrong. I was too independent, I was too focused on wanting to build a career, I wasn’t family-driven enough. I remember thinking, “Maybe I didn’t really have good parental models. Maybe my parents didn’t really show me what marriage

was like. Maybe there is something wrong with me that I don't want to have kids and I want to have a career." I was calling myself into question over and over. Sophia's partner made it seem, "as if it's my fault for things that are beyond my control".

Once Madeline finally gave in to her partner's continued manipulation and pressure to get rid of her pets, he claimed that he didn't really want her to give them away. She feels that he tried to convince her of this so he wouldn't seem like the "bad guy". Eleanor established that the intentionality of the confusion was cruel and hard for her to "wrap [her] brain around". That it falls so far outside of the average person's wheelhouse, and it is so hard to believe or grasp that someone could be "messing with your mind and playing these games" to confuse you and "win".

"Humor". This is a subcode of 'Gaslit' because it was one distinct tool that cropped up where INT partners would mask their intent and behavior but would still challenge PNTs' perceptions of reality. Eight INTs would use jokes at PNTs' expense to disguise putdowns and derogatory comments, both privately and in front of others, and then would use other steps of gaslighting as described above (such as telling the PNT they are too sensitive or taking it wrong etc.).

"He would be very critical of, make sarcastic remarks, which were to him 'just joking.' I always thought, 'I'm going to write a book someday about emotional abuse called Just Joking.'" (Tara) Vanessa addressed the difficulty in pushing back:

Veiled humor, making fun of me in public, teasing me. And if I got upset, "oh, you're just being sensitive." It's something that I could never put my finger on. It

felt like passive aggressive humor with a knife in it. I would try to bring it up and say, “you’re putting me down”. He’d say, “Can you prove that I’m doing this?” She related that her partner was very witty and that he always had a comeback, so it was hard to counter him. This form of humor was designed to devalue the PNT in some way but seemed to be disguised so as not to disrupt the INT façade. Robin gave an example of one of the jokes that her partner used, “Even with friends when we were online, he would be like “Yeah, she’s such a c-u-n-t” jokingly, and then he’d be like “Oh, I’m just kidding.” “Just kidding” was an often-used line in her relationship, and as observed above, Robin felt acclimatized into accepting this behavior as jokes.

Financial Entitlement. This is a subcode of ‘Controlled’ as it appeared in the data as an abusive tool to control the PNT. 19 INT partners would use finances to keep their partners bound to the relationship, or alternatively INTs felt entitled to use either PNTs’ or common funds for their own purposes, out of balance from what the PNT would be able to spend or take ownership of. There were commonly stories about extravagant spending for INT benefit, debt, or mismanagement caused by INT spending, and INT under or unemployment while continuing to overspend.

In ten of the relationships, money was directed towards the INTs’ lifestyle and projects to the detriment of the unit or PNT financial health. Dawn’s partner had extravagant spending habits, however, would do low-income, part-time or periodic work without picking up any of the homecare duties. She called her relationship a financially costly mistake. “He’s an extravagant spender. He’s my half-million-dollar mistake. He went through my half a million dollars in the five years we were together.” Like many

other participants, Robin realized that her partner was happy to spend her money, but not his and he seemed to have a philosophy that's "what is mine is mine, and what is yours is mine". She was left feeling used and controlled because he was willing to leave her with nothing. Jessica paid bills for her partner to her detriment even after agreements to the contrary. She ended up having to pay off substantial debts racked up by her ex, negatively affecting her credit:

He would end up spending so much money on things and made it feel like it was on me but ultimately, it was for things he wanted and that would help him get what he wanted. I feel that financial abuse played a significant part in the deterioration of my former relationship. I was constantly loaning and paying money toward my ex to help him get better control of his finances. Most was never repaid and seen as a 'gift' In the end, he locked me out of the home, "renovated" it and tried in the end to 'bill me' for the costs of it.

Dawn was also locked out of her home towards the end because she refused to buy a plane ticket for her partner to go visit another woman. Ani's theory about the extravagant spending on her partner added another dimension besides entitlement and exploitation. She believed that his spending was in service to his image, saying, "he asked me for my debit card so that he could pay. So, he wanted to use my money, but he wanted it to look like he was the one who was covering the costs of the meal. That was a very common." He also refused to let her get a job at any place he considered "lesser than" even through a period of time when they had large debt, and he lost his job. Brooke's partner (married coworker) blackmailed her into spending on him:

He'd come out and visit me even if there wasn't work, but I'd have to pay for the flight. When he wanted a gift, he'd make me buy it and then he'd threaten that if I didn't, he would tell our boss. So, it became very manipulative.

He drained every bit of savings that I had over the course of our marriage. I covered everything. I managed the bills from the moment we got married. He had my credit card in his name, and he racked that up. We were constantly just treading water. I remember feeling very anxious throughout our marriage about how much money we had. I was anticipating the next paycheque because he would just spend everything we ever had on whatever he wanted and left me to figure that out how we were going to cover those costs. (Ani)

Some noted that they were not the only people their partners would take advantage of:

But monetary loss like that over the years, like going to a restaurant, "I don't have the resources. I just paid this big bill today, so can you take it on?" Very rarely would he pitch in and take the bill after the first year. It was usually me because I was making more, and I can get money from my family. After we broke up, his extended family said, "No, he was always asking for money from home too." So yeah, he was milking it everywhere, left, right and center. (Morgan)

It would have been all my money because he had no money. He liked to spend his money on extravagant things all the time, rack up his credit cards. He would actually steal money from me and other people he had working under him. I spent a lot of money and probably lost a lot of savings in that relationship. (Diana)

Like some others, Nancy's partner took control of the finances and justified this by devaluing her contribution:

There was financial control. I did have a fulltime job, but it was very much reminded to me that I didn't finish post-secondary school, I was just working a job, I wasn't in a career. He was out making the big bucks, trying to build the foundation for our lives and all this big stuff. "Oh, these purchases are happening because of my money and how much I make."

At the end, Rita's partner also lied and hid money and she has had to chase him for reimbursement of expenses that he was obligated to pay. Iris had been a teacher and was supporting everyone on her salary, but felt she became trapped due to the financial setup of the relationship. Her partner would only put his name on assets, and at the end made deliberate steps to bankrupt her, using the court system and refusing to pay child support:

It took a couple of years before you start to really see this –I had given up my career because of the children. So, I was solely dependent. It was financial abuse. I was trapped because of the finances, not knowing how I can get out with two kids and not having a cent to my name. There was nothing ever joint.

Elise realized in hindsight that her partner had been systematically maneuvering her into financial dependency from the time that they were dating. Elise provided a detailed list of financial entitlement and abuse perpetrated within their relationship which has been included in Appendix E. This list encapsulates many common experiences of the participants who dealt with financial entitlement from their partners and provides a deeper dive into the data than the interview format could provide.

Debt. This is a subcode of “Financial Entitlement” and is alluded to in this above code wherein the INT partner would overspend the joint budget, sometimes using PNT funds, for their own purposes. At least seven participants dealt with the aftermath of debt caused by their partner, often unaided.

Kyla stated, “I would literally beg him to stop spending money on this stuff because we have no money.” Tara would never know when a cheque was going to bounce because of her partner’s propensity to spend as soon it was earned. She found this to be an extremely humiliating experience. Because money was scarce, she was told to budget better. She felt the blame had been shifted to her, despite her partner’s gambling addiction. Cecilia believed that it was aspects of her partner’s personality that kept him from being a full contributor, and that grandiosity was what caused the descent into debt:

Throughout the relationship, I was the one that always had the steady good job. I carried everything. He couldn’t keep a job if his life depended on it. Huge sense of being superior. Felt like he should be the boss. But he had no qualifications to be the boss of anything and quit a decent job to start his own business, which he literally went right into leasing a brand-new truck, hiring people to do the work for him before he was even making any money. That was in 2008, when everything started to crash. We lost a lot. I was paying a mortgage on my credit card. I couldn’t carry all the bills. Our debt load was so huge.

Devalued and Reduction. This is a subcode of “Controlled” and represents a purposeful diminishment of the PNT by the INT, either verbally or through behavior. It could be covertly or overtly performed. This happens in private circumstances, and might

include backhanded compliments, telling the PNT how badly they are doing, put-downs, ignoring, and being treated as an inconvenience. The PNT may be motivated to take status and identity at the PNT's expense, by representing themselves as superior in some way. This may lead to increased isolation of the PNT, and the data showed that devaluation and reduction became worse in each of the relationships as time went on. All but three participants reported incidences of feeling devalued and reduced by their partners in terms of worth and ability.

Multiple participants spoke about feeling undercut when their opinions differed from that of their partners, however, devaluing also took place without discrepant beliefs. Brooke said, "So he's got to make somebody else feel crappy about themselves or feel like he's got the control." Madeline identified that her partner would put down anything that she really liked, including where she lived. He would opine that he knew better and would use the excuse of his professional experience to devalue her opinions and to pathologize her. Robin felt that her partner's devaluation of her was strategic, using subtle comments designed to wound or backhanded compliments that kept her questioning his intentions. She believed this was to make himself seem superior and to assert his "specialness" by pushing her down emotionally. At times he would act like he was embarrassed by her or would make fun of her pain. Dawn was told she was horrible, crazy, that she made her partner's life miserable, and that she, "couldn't keep my act together" while financially and logistically doing the work to support the family. Eleanor noticed that her partner could take her better qualities and turn them into faults. This

made her feel like he was robbing her of the good things about her by portraying these as character defects. She also mentioned that he acted betrayed by her small weight gain.

It was subtle at the beginning; Say if I handled a situation differently than how he would have handled it, he would say some very sexist remarks. "I can see why you dealt with it this way, but it's not effective. But because you're a woman, you can't be as decisive as a man." There was definitely a feeling of superiority. The activities or things he liked that were different from mine were better. And the things that I enjoyed that he didn't approve of were inferior. They were a waste of time. They were not worth doing, and you shouldn't be bothered with participating with those activities. And if he had to do it, it would be to appease me. When it comes to our conflicts, whenever I was upset, whenever I was angry, the first question he would ask me was, "Are you on your period?" (Valerie)

Tara discussed how insidious she felt that this form of emotional abuse (EA) was. She felt undermined and internalized the reduction of her credibility, particularly by her partner's comments crediting other people for being more "bright" or "interesting".

I was having baby number two and then it comes up again. "When are you going to get a real job?" Thank you for acknowledging that I'm making humans and raising them is not work. I was reminded I don't have an education, please don't let me forget that. Literally those things would be said to me. And today, I'm like "Did he just agree to those so he could keep rubbing my nose in it?" (Nancy)

Some of the participants spoke about their partner's skill in devaluing them or reducing their credibility within the relationship. "I'd be crying, and he'd be like "You look so

funny when you cry”. He’s not a stupid person by any means. He’s very skillful in how he undermined me and how he did things. It was very backhandedly.” (Robin) Kyla felt her partner treated her as if she was not entitled to her own feelings, “He was really great at invalidating my feelings. If I was upset about something, he would convince me that it was ridiculous, and I was overreacting.” Ani’s partner was more direct in his approach, “he was very good at cutting me down and at telling me that I wasn’t worth it, that I wouldn’t be successful without him, that he was the only one who could be successful.”

Some of the participants became aware that this form of EA moved from what was more covert at the beginning of the relationship into more overt forms of devaluation. For instance, Claire noticed that her partner made use of more directly abusive language as time went on. At the end of their relationship, Cecilia, felt her partner was no longer bothering to hide his devaluation of her, “When we first separated, of course Stan went with the whole, “You’re useless. You’re ugly. You’re haggard. No man is ever going to love you. You’re not attractive, unless the ugly lights come on, bla bla bla.” It was only in hindsight that many of the participants could see with clarity the extent of the EA. Tara pointed out, “I didn’t realize until I got out of it really, just how much it had undermined me. When we were at home, he would do things to undermine my accomplishments, make comments.” Brooke talked about not having the capacity to fully see what was occurring whilst in the relationship, “Every single day you’re being beaten down and beaten down. It really isn’t about you. You don’t have the capacity when you’re in it to even recognize or appreciate it.”

I felt bad, “What can I do? I need to get back to the gym. I need to make myself more attractive to her. Maybe I could do more around here to show this, that, and the other thing.” Now that I look back on it, “This is a pattern.” That love bomb, devalue, and discard, it’s so simple, but that’s what it is, and it stretched out over five years. There’s a lot of devalue time, for sure. There’s no one defining moment where it goes, “Now it’s shit. Now this relationship is garbage.” It’s like picking away at paint on a wall, and before you know it, now all the paint is gone. It’s just so gradual that before you know it, now you’re into it and now you’re going, “What the hell is happening here? How did I get to this point where I’m like a beaten dog?” (Dorian)

Name Called. This is a subcode of ‘Devalued and Reduction’ often used to reduce credibility, especially when the PNT pushes back against INT behavior or disagrees. This behavior is much more overt than many of the devaluing statements or comments that INTs would use. 11 participants reported name calling in their relationship.

In Ani’s case, the name calling started even before dating (she did not like her partner at first). Madeline recalls instances of name calling when she would not do as her partner wanted her to, calling her a “freak”. Kyla said the first instance of this happening was when she called her partner out on his behavior, and Robin noticed it during arguments. Similarly, Vanessa stated, “I definitely saw very toxic sides when he’s unhappy with me, I would be an imbecile. I would be a bitch. I would be incompetent.” Dawn stated that her partner would call her a “liar” and a “whore”. Dorian expressed that he was particularly affected by his partner calling him “fucking retarded” when she was

displeased with him. Morgan and Elise observed that their partners used name calling as a tool to prompt them to work harder in the relationship. Morgan's partner would give her work that he wanted her to do for him to the point that she became overwhelmed, and yet he would still call her "lazy". Elise's described that her partner needed her to continue working hard so he labelled her a "hypochondriac" to ensure that she would keep going even if ill. She indicated that had she stopped, his failure to participate in the household would "stand out like a sore thumb". She would "soldier on" even while pregnant.

"Crazy". This is a subcode of 'Name Called' representing instances where PNTs would be called "crazy" by their partners or given an indication that they were not fully sane in some way. Often this was used as a tool for manipulation to reduce credibility in the face of resistance, challenge, or more generally to assert superiority. Some participants linked this behavior to their self-doubt, and they would question whether they were overthinking negative INT behaviors. In addition, some participants indicated that their partners or the circumstances of the relationship made them feel like they were going crazy. 15 participants reported their partners calling them crazy or had the feeling of going crazy in the relationship.

He'd make me feel crazy and then completely blow it up at me. Like I had brain problems and memory problems. I hope that I have stuff wrong in my head, and I'm delusional because that would be something that I'm in control of and I could fix that. And everything will go back to normal. We were not allowed to talk about things that happened ever unless it was me apologizing for being a psychopath or being mentally loony tunes to him. (Megan)

Like Megan, Vanessa was told that her perceptions were all in her own head and that she was crazy, which caused her to question her own sanity. Eventually she realized that there was something wrong; she knew she was not crazy. Tara pointed out that people had been picking up on certain behaviors but didn't tell her about what they had seen until later. These snippets helped her not to feel crazy after all. Elise expressed her concern that she must have seemed crazy to others because she was so deeply unhappy in her relationship. Rita spoke about how her partner would deliberately frame her actions:

He'd given an example and I would sound like a crazy controlling witch because I had flipped out over whatever. He had lost his keys again. And I dare to be pissed off. I'm sure it sounded crazy to everyone that I was hysterical because it took him two minutes to find his keys. Well first, it was 20 minutes and second, this has happened 12 times and you've conveniently left out your continual refusal to problem-solve it.

Nancy started to wonder because of her partner's constant use of the term:

Maybe I was this looney that he kept making me feel like I was. That I was always blowing up and was this big ticking time bomb. You actually believe those things. If somebody wakes up and looks at you and is like, "Hey psycho."

Every day for years, you're going to start to wonder. "Am I a little bit? Maybe?"

Robin and Ava explained that they started to feel crazy because of their partners' gaslighting behaviors. When Elise was questioning herself in this way, she was contemplating leaving her relationship and didn't want to "blow up" her world because she was reacting to something that she shouldn't be. She felt that having a crazy spouse

was part of her partner's narrative. Kyla hypothesized that her partner was framing her as crazy to others so that she would be more isolated and so that he could convince himself and others (including during an emergency court order hearing) that she was the problem:

He went to this little support system that I had left and tried to isolate me from them more and tell them this story of how I was going to do something crazy. I was acting irrationally. I think he might actually believe that. If I wanted to leave him, I must be crazy. There must be something wrong with me. There must be some kind of imbalance in my head for me to want to end this relationship. He left a book about borderline personality disorder in [my bag]. And that was his way of retelling me, you're obviously crazy if you're leaving me. So, he still does stuff like this. He frames it in a way, "I'm really concerned about you". I think you're ill and you don't realize it. Instead of just coming to terms with the fact that I don't want to be with him, he was abusive or whatever.

Dustin felt that if he had stayed longer in the relationship that he would have truly gone crazy. Brooke identified a need for support when someone is in a dyad such as this:

Because of the relationship you feel like you're crazy. You feel like it's all you. So even just saying that to you I get goose bumps. It's so toxic, and there's such a need for people out there to feel that they can be heard and seen and supported. Because I didn't always get that from everybody during it. And I understand why. I mean, most people are, like, oh my god, why would you be doing that?

Discredited. "When a toxic person can no longer control you, they will try to control how others see you." (Blakeway, 2022). This is a subcode of 'Controlled' and

represents the public portrayal of the PNT's character to others by the INT in a way that is designed to reduce PNT credibility or to increase the INT's feeling of superiority. By diminishing the PNT, the INT may feel more in control of their partner and relationship, and this may limit PNT choices or freedoms. This may happen in front of the PNT or in their absence. It may happen in any realm, including personally and professionally. The PNT may be depicted as the "bad partner". 17 of the participants reported this.

Participants observed that their partner would discredit them to show superiority. "If we were out socially, let's say we were standing talking to another couple, he would step in front of me and engage with them. And if I started to speak, he would talk over me." (Tara) Megan discovered that her partner was willing to ruin her professional reputation with others because she began to get more attention than him within their field:

I was being associated with [our] company and he hated that. He he started trying to shame me often or decrease my importance and value. Then he started twisting things [with employees], he was starting to pit them against me. And so, I started having a really rough relationship with them.

Other participants ascertained that their partners seemed to be driven by ego when discrediting them to others so that the INT would appear to be an injured party in the narrative. Dorian's partner was upset that she had not gotten a job that she wanted and publicly blamed him for it. She went on to accuse him of having a temper, which he asserts does not describe him at all:

"Oh, you know, Dorian ruined me getting this job at this winery." In front of everyone. And I'm like, "What are you talking about?" "You went and talked to

the Dave guy, and you said, ‘Oh, Jane wants to get a job here, she’d really love to work here.’ Well, it just ruined all my chances.” And I’m like, “Okay?” And “Oh, Dorian’s got a really bad temper sometimes.” She sat there right in front of everybody at the dinner table and everybody’s listening, and she goes, “That’s where Joe, our son, gets his temper from.” And I just look at her, I’m like, “What?” She goes, “Well, you know what I mean,” and laughs. And I’m like, “That’s an awful thing to say. Even if it were true, that’s awful. And it’s not true.”

Similarly, Robin found out that her partner was putting her down and was actively sabotaging other people’s impressions of her by telling negative and untruthful stories. Her partner was openly derogatory about her behind her back, while expressing words of love and commitment to her (which she found out about post-breakup):

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that he moved in three months after we were together. I think that that was planned. Because three months after, he was moving his things in and his friends were visiting and I was out getting takeout for everybody, and that’s when he told them that I was just “A fat fucking cow.”

That was early, early on. There was nothing there was the very beginning.

She explained that her partner was angling to get an easy living situation, with free labour and a convenient relationship. She had to deal with the fallout from these misrepresentations, including a false story that she was the one who had cheated (rather than her INT partner). She felt he was attempting to appear better than her by reducing her credibility, and that he was enjoying playing the victim role. Dustin also felt that his partner threw him under the bus with their families by continually painting him as the

“bad guy”, which ended up causing a rift between the families and in his own. Rita is uncertain of what her partner told friends and family during their breakup, but observed that people who she had been close with abruptly stopped talking with her:

Not one friend checked in on me. I don't know what he told 50 people but not one of them, who had been in my life for seven years, checked in on me or did the classic, “We're sorry things didn't work out. Wish you all the best.” Nothing.

As well, Valerie spoke about her partner attempting to turn others against her with false claims, promoting lies about her being mentally fragile as an excuse so that he could keep tabs on her after the breakup through expressing concern for her safety and wellbeing.

Twisted Blame. This is a subcode of ‘Controlled’ which represents the PNTs’ feelings of being blamed or told that they are the ones who are at fault for any problems that might arise. INTs may twist the conversation around so that even if the PNT is bringing up a behavior or pattern of the INT that they don't like, the INT would play the victim and offload any personal responsibility. This code embodies an extreme form of blame shifting as initially described by Freud (1946). In some cases, this took the form of mirroring back PNT emotions or concerns. All participants reported incidences of this.

When things didn't go well it was always somebody else's fault. At the time I felt sorry for him. But in retrospect now, I feel really sad that somebody can live their life and never take accountability for anything, positive or negative. He actually places accountability on himself for the positives, but he's not really believing that he's the reason. And I think that's the sad part for me, he makes other people feel less about themselves so that he can take an ounce of that for himself. It's

like he's robbing from people so he can feel better about himself. Because he can't look in a mirror. He doesn't like what he sees. (Brooke)

Clearly, it was my fault that he was having an affair and had to go away to [job] because I wasn't giving him enough attention, and he needed to get affection from somebody else if I wasn't going to give it to him. He blamed me for everything. It was always my fault, whatever. (Dawn)

Cecelia learned that she could expect blame if she ever came between her partner and something that he wanted to do:

His friend asked, "What are you doing tonight?" "Oh, nothing. Why?" "Well, why don't you come by for some beers and we'll play some hockey?" And Stan was like, "Yeah, sure. That sounds good." And I'm like, "So, you don't have any other plans tonight, Stan? Nothing?" And he's like, "No, why? Should I?" "Well, it's our anniversary." And instead of being like a normal person and saying, "Oh my God, I forgot." He looked at his friend and was like, "Well, I guess I can't come over now. Sorry." Wow. That, of course, ended up into an eruption. It was my fault it was our anniversary. Those are the things that I just learned to expect

Rita similarly to other participants, found herself caretaking her partner when she had come to him about something he had done that had hurt her:

I'm looking at him and I didn't have the language for this, except the awkward thing I said, "You just victim stole. I don't get it." We would kind of laugh about it, and he'd go, "Oh, yeah." This is me coming to you, telling you that I'm upset and now, we're talking about how upset you are that I'm upset and now I'm

taking care of you. I'm pretty sure I'm the hurt party. You're supposed to apologize and take care of me.

“Looking back on it now, it's, “Victim, victim, victim.” Nothing's her fault. I bought all these stories because that's what you do. You give people a level of trust right off the bat and you just believe it.” (Dorian) Even after insulting and silent treatment, Dorian expressed that he had to go and fix things. Tara also felt blamed for everything, but said, “at times I was able to tap into that and say, “No, this is not you.” Sometimes it was just so glaring that it wasn't me. I mean how could I possibly have been responsible for that?” Eleanor highlighted how strategic her partner's ability to twist blame really was:

I was upset about something, and I said, “You know, I'm really hurt about this thing that happened.” And about half an hour into the conversation about me being hurt, I found myself apologizing to him. And it struck me that this is about the fifth or sixth time that I was trying to tell him what hurt me, but I was apologizing. So, I stopped for a second and said, “Hey, I'm just noticing that every time I feel angry with you, and I get hurt, somehow or other, I end up apologizing to you. But you never apologize to me.” And he laughed and I said, “What is so funny? I'm mad and I'm hurt and I'm the one apologizing to you every time.” And he laughed and he said, “Oh, I did this to my last girlfriend for three years and she never caught on. And that's why you're in the car and not her.” And I was so thrilled that he thought I was so smart and clever. The impact of that moment never really dawned on me until many, many years later. He was intentionally doing behaviors that he knew would get him out of saying he was

sorry but blame the other person. They have this magical way of flipping things to be your fault and then, you end up apologizing. And he was proud of it and proud of how smart I was. He didn't seem at all upset or disturbed and it felt as though he owned it but realistically, he never apologized for what he did. He thought it was awesome. And that was such a clear indication to me of the intention – because one of the most difficult things to convince anybody of, including the person in it, is that it's intentional. It falls outside the wheelhouse for a normal, healthy person to believe or even grasp that somebody could be messing with your mind and playing these games with the intention to confuse you and to win. Even if things go right, you're blamed because they will find fault.

Most participants described feeling uncertain by the turn of events, when suddenly they were finding the narrative twisted. “When I would bring up an issue or a feeling, he would twist it so much that I would get confused.” (Ava) Jessica described the result of standing up for herself:

“You can't do that to me. You can't tell me it's going to be one price and then it's over twice the amount going on my credit card”, and I got really angry. I was explaining to him why that didn't work for me. I felt a lot better after having said that. “Okay, I got that off my chest.” Because it was building up inside of me. Later that evening he phoned, and he tore a strip off me for getting angry at him, and twisted it around, “You can never do that to me again. Don't put me on the spot like that. How dare you, after all I do for you?” I hung up the phone feeling

like I had just been spun around and dropped. I had no idea which way was up. It was very difficult for him to take accountability for anything that went wrong.

Nancy elaborated about frustration and confusion when blame was twisted:

It would always get turned around quite quickly. Anything that I brought up would always get flipped around and end up being my fault. And I would be the one apologizing at the end of said discussion. As he would put it, I was very dramatic in the sense that I felt like I would never get a response out of him. It was always deadpan and then he would just tell me all the ways that it was my fault. So, I was always very animated because it was so frustrating. Because I could see the circle that didn't exist physically. I see it. I feel it, and I can't prove it. Everything this man does is projection. To this moment, everything that he does, he blames you for it, accuses you of, makes you believe that it's you. Like to your core, you believe it's you. And he's doing it all.

A few of the participants were amazed that their partners seemed to genuinely believe their versions of events. Mia's partner blamed her for the demise of the relationship:

His response to that was so unique, in that he switched the blame. The relationship 100% ended because of the extramarital affair when I was pregnant. But in his mind, the relationship ended because I was giving up on the family. People can see through it pretty quickly, but the fact that he continues to believe that narrative is really interesting to me.

Some participants found that the INT used shame as a tactic to avoid accountability. For example, Megan stated, "when seeing evidence of cheating- I felt like I couldn't say

anything or do anything because I would be shamed. It was always twisted all the time.” Similarly, to other participants, Vanessa’s response to the ongoing blame was to try to make things up to her partner by proving she could be the “best wife, best mom”.

Scrutinized. This is a subcode of ‘Controlled’ and indicates a micro-tracking or monitoring of PNT behavior by the INT, consisting of regular critiques. Many of the PNTs were left with the feeling that they could never get things right and often the behavior critiques encapsulated a double standard which the INT themselves did not adhere to. 17 of the participants reported feeling scrutinized by their partners.

Megan described that her partner would watch her every move to see if she was doing things “wrong” or “right” and would call her a bad person or tell her she was not doing a good enough job, “It was almost like he was always testing me. Then he would compliment me if I passed the test. And he would tell me exactly how I passed the test”. This included monitoring her calls, “he wanted to be in control of our cell phone plans so that all my text messages and emails would go to him”. In Brooke’s long-distance relationship her partner would require checking-in, especially if he knew she was going out, and would berate her if she couldn’t answer. She said there was always something that he could find that she did wrong every day, leading to self-doubt:

Every thought I had I second guessed even as I had it. Because I needed to put it up against the checklist that had been given to me as to what made me worthy of my relationship with him. Did I get up at the right time? Because otherwise I was lazy. Did I put enough gas in my car because my car needs to run? Did I not have the newest technology? Everyone who’s smart knows they need the newest

technology. I can think of all the things that I had to check off on my list, and it never was a full checklist.

“He started to take tabs on what I was doing all day. It was almost like I was reporting what I was doing all day, and if it was a valid contribution. It felt like I was being evaluated.” (Vanessa) Rita felt scrutinized on even the most simplistic of her actions, such as the right way to open the fridge or wash her car window:

He said, “No, Rita.” And he was always like, thank God, he just caught me in time. The angle of degrees in which I’m allowed to open the fridge door before I’m committing some horrible wrong that thank God, he’s prevented me from. I was monitored for the degree of angles that I opened the fridge door at. My best friend and I were talking, “He doesn’t like where I put the washcloth.” And, she would say, “Of course you have to work that out. You’re allowed to a difference of opinion.” Now, I know it was narcissistic rage but what he would do is he would scrutinize me, and he would then jump in because he’d stop me from making this terrible error. And, it was all, “Thank God he got there just in time.” I hate this dynamic. He was there to stop me, just in time and to teach me that the way I opened the fridge door was letting out too much heat and it’s about energy consumption and how did I not know that. It was that sense of being scrutinized.

Some partners spent a lot of time monitoring PNT body size. Also, Una stated, “I often felt he was always waiting for me to make a mistake. I was always trying to get it right”.

Never Good Enough. This is a subcode of ‘Scrutinized’ wherein at least 22 PNTs were told in covert, overt, or a combination of both ways that they were not good enough

or doing well enough no matter what they did. This may consist of regular and unpredictable critiques that may be arbitrary in the moment or based on INT mood state. PNTs reported feeling “confused” or “crushed” by this feeling. It is likely designed to keep PNTs under INT control in some way by keeping them off balance or to keep them from catching on to INT negative behaviors. Many PNTs reported that they felt like there were working for continually moving targets so that they would be constantly having to try harder and prove themselves.

Dustin related that his partner would manage to point out perceived shortcomings on a regular basis. Jessica echoed a similar sentiment, “it felt like I was screwing up all the time. Like I was the one making poor choices or being unreasonable. ‘You’re being unreasonable, Jessica.’” Eleanor had this to say about treatment by her partner:

Like I’m an idiot who doesn’t get it. And I’m looking around with dinner on the go, trying to talk to this guy [on the phone] who is laying in the [lake], who is enraged that I’m not shoving my little, tiny kids out so that I can talk to him at length about his anxiety in [other country]. So that was an awakening, that moment of realizing nothing was ever good enough. Nothing I did, nothing I said. And then, I started testing the theory, so I remember saying to him, “You know, you don’t like anything about me. Nothing I do is good. I’m not a good parent. I’m not a good wife. I’m not a good lover. I’m not good looking. I don’t make enough room for you. You don’t like how I’m with my friends. You don’t like how I am with your friends. Like there’s nothing good.” And the futility of, “what if I’m more loving?” No, that doesn’t go well. If I’m less loving, no that doesn’t

go well. So, you're just like a mouse caught in a cage where they keep changing the maze. And you're trying to find the way out or the way in, you'll take either. And then, it's like, "Well, you know, you're an idiot because you can't find the way out but we're going to change it every day." So, if I ask questions, I was interrogating him, if I didn't ask questions, I was ignoring him.

Brooke felt that the messaging was changing her view of herself and allowed her partner to stay in control:

I'm a smart person, but he had the ability to take all of that away, and he had complete control. He made me feel like I wasn't smart, that I was dumb. That I was lazy and that I wasn't good enough. There was never anything that I ever did that was actually good enough for him near the end. There was always something that he could find that I was doing wrong with my day, every single day. And it kept me under his finger. He always had the ability to make me feel like I wasn't good enough. I wasn't worthy.

Some spoke of the subtlety of the ongoing messaging their partners would give them to let them know that they were never measuring up, and they began to internalise the messaging. Ani felt that promoted a dependency on her partner, "There were many more times where he said, "You're not good enough" in many, many different aspects. So, I think I definitely was afraid to be on my own."

Participants also expressed a hindsight revelation that it didn't matter what they did or how they changed themselves to please their partner, it was never right or enough because it was never about them in the first place.

It didn't matter how I looked. It didn't matter when I was 130 pounds and super fit and wore make up everyday. It didn't matter. To him, it still wasn't good enough, and I always took that so personally. I was like "I need to do more. I could do better. I could do this. I could do that. It's me." I really learned that there was nothing that I could have done that would have changed that, nothing. I did everything for him way beyond reasonable expectations. (Robin)

I could always see the other person's side. Then I'd try harder. So, it would get better, but then I'd try harder and then it wouldn't be okay again. So, then I'd try something else. I always felt like I was reinventing myself. I'll be funnier. Okay, now I'll be a lot more serious. Okay, now I'll be more... I felt like I was trying every different persona to try to make it work, and it just never felt like it was enough. So, I participated willingly in this whole thing. I was changing myself. I was working on things, and I never reached a point of satisfaction. (Vanessa)

I started trying to make sure I looked the best for him all the time. Always having my make-up done and dressing nice and always having new shoes and working out all the time to make sure I looked the way he wanted me to look all the time. But obviously that wasn't enough because it has nothing to do with that, looking back on it. But yeah, my self-esteem was next to nothing. (Diana)

Rita's relationship took a turn when she came to that realization:

I was trying to learn how to have a less conflict-ridden marriage to someone that I love, and so, I worked on this. What changed for me is I realized, "I actually got really good at this, and it made no difference in his behavior."

Several participants communicated that their response to their partner's regular critiques or messaging was to try to impress or to work harder with the sense that things could change for the better if only they did better. Many expressed that they always felt that they had to prove their worth to partners. "It made me just keep working harder and harder and harder to be better. And I never knew when I was completely screwing up. So, I became a perfectionist, you know what I mean, like a super woman." (Elise)

Conflict. This is a subcode of 'Controlled' and was created because participants noticed that conflict greatly increased over time in their relationships, which included elements of emotional punishment, threats, intimidation, and rage. 15 participants reported conflict in their relationships that worsened over time.

A few participants referred to conflicts which occurring relatively early in their relationships, before moving in together or getting married. Vanessa described that her partner was scary and had a "wild temper", so not only would she fear his size, but also the vicious things he would say. He would, "hit below the belt". Conflict would most often occur when PNTs would push back or resist what partner wanted from them. Mona pointed out that the fights her partner would start were never actually about the issue at hand, but masked things like insecurities and jealousy. Iris found that the increasing conflict sucked all her energy out and she started doing her best to avoid it.

Because these conflicts universally worsened over time, the effects on PNT wellbeing were substantial, and Claire for instance, was prompted by the increased conflict to leave the relationship. Madeline described her view of the conflict:

It got worse and worse and worse. I've never felt so poor in my life. I've been a single mom, I don't have any family, I've been on my own my whole life, I was homeless as a teen. So, I've been poor, and being with him was the most poor... I'm poor in friendship. I feel poor in spirit. I'm poor in just not eating and not sleeping. It was just the most poor.

Punished. This is a subcode of 'Conflict' and explains further the subtle ways that INTs would persist in getting their own way through a consequential form of punishment, which included withdrawal of themselves or their affections and ghosting, angry backlash, and flirting or behaving demonstratively with others. 20 participants felt punished by their partners when the INT did not get their own way.

As soon as [PNTs] get to a point where they're starting to breathe and they're starting to feel a little bit of lightness in their lives, that's when they strike. And they strike hard, and it's almost like you're taking a breath, and somebody sucker punches you in the stomach. Now you're scared to breathe again. And it's this whole cyclical relationship that continually happens because they have no choice. They can't break free from him. (Brooke)

Many mentioned withdrawal as a common tactic used for punishing them when their partner was displeased. As Eleanor put it:

Of course, I said yes because I knew that if I said no, there would be punishment because that's how they extract their control. That's how their train you. They withdraw the relationship from you. And it's really painful to be in a relationship with somebody where they're just extraordinarily hostile just under the surface.

Diana and Dorian got used to longer term silent treatment for days or weeks on end. “The not good side was petulance, like a spoiled kid if he didn’t get his way. Sulking, avoidance. If something happened between us that he didn’t like, my reply, he wouldn’t talk for days to me. That kind of thing.” (Ruby)

R: Do you feel like it was conscious, that if things were bad and you were starting to head down that road of contemplating leaving, do you think he would sense that? P: I’m sure. Because after, the argument would be followed up with the punishment of, “I’m not coming home.” Or silence. I would just not be able to get a hold of him. I’d be like, “Is he dead?” I don’t know. I have no idea where he is. I don’t know if he got into a car accident. I have no clue. When things were bad, it was the same cycle. Things would get bad, I would be punished by being alone or silenced or, whatever. Some form of punishment that would get to me. (Nancy)

Both Dorian and Diana related that their partners would become demonstrative/flirt with or touch other people in front of them. A few other participants mentioned punishment for displeasing their partners, “If I was to be confrontational there would be some sort of repercussion. It could be anything. Verbal abuse, belittling, not depositing your allowance. Just making life difficult somehow.” (Iris) “There would be a real terrible retaliation in the moment, like super hyper-sensitivity if I said something back. And then later it would be met with some kind of a punishment.” (Vanessa)

Threatened. This is a subcode of ‘Conflict’ in which there is an implied or overt statement of intent of danger to the PNT in some way. Often threats would be used as an escalated form of control to keep the PNT off-balance, or for the INT to get their own

way in a specific situation when other manipulation tactics were not effective. Many of the participants observed that the threatening behavior increased over time in the relationship. 12 participants reported feeling threatened.

Several ways that INT partners would use threats for control included warnings that they would leave the participant, cheat again, ruin a PNT career or finances, prevent the PNT from leaving, or to take the PNT's child away if they didn't get what they wanted from the PNT. "If anything disgruntled him slightly or we got into a fight, he would threaten things. He would start searching for places to live, but he would leave it up so that I could see it." (Robin) As a form of control, Cecilia's partner threatened to cheat on her again if she didn't engage in certain sexual acts that she was uncomfortable with. Brooke and Elise also linked their partner's threats to a sense that the INT felt control was slipping. Brooke admitted that this fear was one of the reasons she stayed longer in the relationship and did things that she did not want to. When Sophia uncovered her partner's cheating, he threatened to take their child away if she disrupted the relationship. At one point Mia's partner took her means of leaving away entirely (her phone and car keys). "He told me that if I left, he was going to keep my daughter and I'd never see her again. It was anything he could've done to get me to have stayed."

Intimidated. This is a subcode of 'Conflict' and represents overt tactics designed to control the immediate situation when the INT is unhappy or not getting their way and other manipulations have failed. This subcode encapsulates an increase in implied potential for violence, through body language, discussing what the INT "could" do,

hinting the potential for or actual pet abuse, and property damage. 14 participants reported their partners using some form of intimidation in this way.

Something that this subcode demonstrated was an escalation in the use of physicality as a method of control. Madeline suggested that she gradually became scared of her partner due to his size. This alone would keep her from challenging him:

He would be mad, but then he'd never swear, and he would never admit he was angry. So, that makes it extra scary. So, he would walk around, and bite his jaw, so I can see all these angry muscles, I'm like, [laughs nervously] "Back away."

Her partner did not like her pets and aside from complaining about them, would make "jokes" about harming them, to the point that she had them rehomed. Vanessa also spoke about her partner's size and how that would be intimidating when he was angry:

"We'd get in terrible fights. He was a huge, scary person with a wild temper. He didn't ever lay hands on me or anything. But he was a vicious fighter, like the worst of the worst. Just hit below the belt. The most painful thing you could say about somebody he would say."

Kyla found that she would be intimidated by her partner because of his aggression when he was upset, and he would back her into a corner. Dawn related that she would be cowering in a corner with her hands over her head sobbing because she would not know how to get away from the situation, and the "craziness of his accusations". She said there was no arguing with him because he was so "adamant" about it and was so "intimidating" with it. Robin stated that her partner got increasingly more aggressive to get his own way

and to push her boundaries, including abusing her pet. She realized in hindsight that he was probably much more capable of violence than she had giving him credit for:

I remember a lot of times when we'd fight, he would be clenching his fists so hard and shaking and his knuckles would be white. I remember sometimes thinking "Is he going to hit me? Is he actually going to do that? Is that where this is going to go?" and being a little bit worrisome, but not convinced. I was like "No, he would never do that", but then now I look on it and I'm like "I think he's capable of that from the comments that he's made."

After a disruptive time in the relationship, Robin recounted an indirect threat of violence:

Two weeks later he came to me in the kitchen, and I was making us lunch, and he was like "Do you ever just get the urge to hurt somebody? I just get the urge to just hurt you. I just want to strangle you."

Some INTs also used intimidating body language for control, like pacing, fists in the air, and yelling, especially towards the end of the relationship. At the end of the relationship, Mona and Iris's partners would restrain them, and Iris was in fear that he might physically attack her. Eleanor described that her partner would walk around and kick things out of his way, slam cupboards, "huff and puff", and use other angry body language. Megan's partner would rage when she did something to disobey him and would go around punching walls.

I was afraid to give any details of my life or have it used against me. If anything ever happens to me, he is the first person you need to suspect. That's how much I

didn't trust. I actually stayed because I was scared. And I didn't see him enough to feel like I was in a place to feel like I could say, "screw off". (Brooke)

At the end of the relationship, Ava's partner threatened violence because she had gone to see a lawyer. Cecilia's threatened to hurt any man that she got involved with in the future.

Rage. This is a subcode of 'Intimidated' because anger and aggression was often used to ensure control or to intimidate the PNT into giving way to what the INT wanted. 'Rage' encapsulates oversized reactions to the stimulus at hand, occurring in sometimes unpredictable moments. Many PNTs reported "walking on eggshells" not to set their partners off (addressed in a later code), and a decreased sense of emotional and/or physical safety. All PNTs discussed ongoing simmering and increasing rage as a feature.

While physical violence was screened for during participant selection to capture trait/subclinical narcissistic dyadic information, rather than having partner violence or criminality as strong features, seven participants mentioned at least one instance of physical violence. Often this was not classified as "physical violence" by the participants, and/or was a one-time event. See Table 8 for a breakdown of incidents.

Table 8

Events of Physical Violence Perpetrated by the INT

Participant	Event Type
Megan	Grabbing PNT wrist, squeezing, and pinning to the wall
Dawn	Pushing INT head against PNT's, pushing into a corner or wall
Valerie	Threw a mug at them
Nancy	Grabbed PNT's arm and pulled them
Diana	Pinned the PNT to the wall by the throat
Elise	Bumped into purposefully
Iris	Gripping hard

So that was something that made me really upset, and I tried to give him an ultimatum for that. And when I did, he blew up on me and he actually threw a ceramic mug at me. I dodged that. But I was terrified. I didn't think that he would ever use force or violence on me. Yet I have seen him do this to other people. I've heard stories of how he had done that to other people. But he had never, ever been physical to me. (Valerie)

Additionally, two participants reported being restrained by their partners. In three participants' cases, they felt that although they had not been physically abused by their partners, that there existed the strong possibility that it could have happened had the relationship continued longer. Property damage was reported by four participants.

Madeline conveyed that her partner wanted to portray himself as "smooth" and "charming", however, was very angry below the surface. Mia defined that her partner showed early signs of a large temper and would blow up for no good reason in unpredictable ways in response to perceived slights. She felt that once she had seen "behind the curtain", that he would unleash his temper much more frequently.

Nancy, Dustin, and Dorian highlighted the unpredictable nature of their partners' explosive anger by using the term "time-bomb" to describe them:

Now is that a life-or-death, lose-your-mind snap show kind of deal? Because it was here. A quinoa salad. It was a ticking time bomb that I knew was going to go off, I just didn't know when. Or what was going to be the trigger mechanism or what was going to light the fuse. But there was always something. (Dorian)

Most of the participants noted that their partners took exception to any forms of resistance and would react with strong anger in those moments to escape culpability or to get their own way. Eleanor observed that her partner's rage seemed to increase the most at times when he was asked to contribute or when she was not available to give him attention or to be of service (when their child was born or when parenting duties interrupted his phone calls to her, for example). She said could feel his rage "across the world" in those moments. Elise stated that her partner would turn his rage on her so that it was clear that she was not allowed to have a reaction to his negative behaviors.

Though there was never any physical abuse per se, he'd push his head against my head and push me into a corner, push me into the wall when he was really angry and telling me what kind of horrible person I was, which was pretty constant by the time I was pregnant. If you called him on the lies or the inconsistencies with the stories, that's when the real explosions happened or the real anger. He did not like to be criticized. He did not like to be questioned whatsoever on his inconsistencies or things that didn't make sense or his extravagant expenditures – or his work ethic or lack of ethic or... There was definitely no criticism or questioning allowed. (Dawn)

Kyla's partner reacted whenever she attempted to set boundaries. Going against her partner's wishes would result in screaming and devaluing her worth and ability. Megan revealed an incident where her partner set "rules" for her that she didn't follow one day:

So, I was breaking the rules and disobeying him by being there. He just lost it. So that guy left and [Chet] was running around punching holes in walls and took the

broom and putting the broom through the drywall, just screaming at me. And how dare I disobey him and super reactive.

Rita was at a loss to figure out why her partner was so angry at her so much of the time:

I tried to have a conversation with him about it. He would then switch into rage and shame of, "Wait a minute. It's my fault?" He would just go off the handle. I never had a sincere apology from that man in seven years. During the awful breakup during one particularly calm conversation where I laid out some recent examples of terrible behaviour, I asked him calmly if he had any thoughts to share on how he'd thought it was okay to treat me so horribly that year. He said, in an apparent moment of insight, "all I know is I have this overwhelming rage towards you". I stayed calm and said, "can you tell me anything I've done that would warrant such a rage?" and he said, "nope" and I asked, "can you tell me why you didn't think it would be helpful to talk about this with any of the four counsellors we saw? That would have been a really valuable place to start", and he replied, "nope". All he knew is that he'd gone from loving me to hating me, and he was baffled to explain it. But he knew that it was about me, not him.

Many participants noted that the ending of the relationship was a large turning point in the escalation of their partner's rage behaviors. Cecilia felt that this had happened because she was no longer "in service" to her partner.

Isolation. This is a subcode of 'Controlled' and indicates that the PNT was feeling cut-off in some way from their support systems, family, friends, or usual community group involvement due to directly to their partner or circumstances of the

relationship. Reasons for feelings of isolation included focus on the INT partner, moving a lot at the behest of a partner, jealousy about social relationships, age gaps creating social distance in friend groups, shame about the true nature of the relationship, and INT behavior relating to or towards PNT support people. In a number of the narratives, isolation served to keep participants longer in their relationships. 25 participants reported feeling some form of isolation during their relationships.

Eleanor speculated that her partner's bid to keep the relationships in their life compartmentalized was so that others would not pick up on his façade, changing depending on who was in front of him. Jessica found herself having a hard time expressing herself to other people because her partner had put limitations around what she was able to talk about with different people, especially his family, and she found that hard to keep track of.

One main reason for isolation cited by participants was an underlying requirement in the relationship to keep the focus on the INT partner (needs and wants), to the exclusion of their own. Mia, for example, suggested that she became so attentive to her partner that her own supports were shut out. Iris was unable to see her own family for many months because her partner only wanted to spend time with his. Megan's partner wanted her to be available at all times for their business, so she, "just disappeared out of my friend's lives". Eventually he began isolating her from the business as well. She addressed hindsight understanding of her partner's deliberate isolation of her:

He wanted me to not be where anyone could talk to me or tell me anything or whatever. So, he started trying to isolate me. And I was already totally isolated

from all my friends and family. I had zero relationships left. I was struggling with this completely silently. I also knew that my family hated him, and he didn't care about my family either. There was no attempt to be a part of any... my friends or my... I wasn't allowed to have any of that. I think that was a scary part for me, "What if no one wants me back? What if my friends are gone, gone? And my family, they're going to abandon me after all this crap."

Jealousy of PNT social relationships was also mentioned as a factor in isolation. Dawn articulated how restricting this was:

He was so jealous. I wasn't allowed to go out without, essentially, his permission, and then if I did go out with permission, he didn't understand (if it was a mutual friend) why it would just be me, or he would be really questioning the validity of what I'm telling him. So, then I just stopped doing everything.

In some cases, the INT did not like people in the PNT's support system and would make it actively difficult for the PNT to maintain relationships (see more in the 'Wedge' code). Madeline expressed that she stopped seeing friends because her partner would imply that he disliked them, and she ended up feeling lonely due to extreme isolation.

On the other hand, some participants discussed how difficult it was to maintain social relationships because people did not like their INT partners and sometimes observed the negative behaviors directed at the PNT. Robin and Dawn identified that people started avoiding them because of their partners' treatment of them.

Shortly after we had started dating my friends sort of dropped off, all the friends that I'd had since I was a kid decided that they didn't want to spend time with him

I guess. They never really told me directly. But they did tell me that they didn't like him, and then they sort of stopped calling or hanging out or whatever. (Kyla)

Cecilia said that she lost some friendships over the relationship. Some tried to warn her about what they were seeing, but she chose to give her partner the benefit of the doubt over her friends. She said she was afraid of the truth and at the time it had been easier to look away. She managed to repair some of those relationships after her breakup.

Participants mentioned shame, embarrassment, or humiliation about the nature of the relationship and self-isolated as a result (see the 'Shame' code for more detail). "I started to self-isolate because I got so sick of hearing myself. That's one thing, to have somebody recognize when somebody's hiding." (Elise) Claire mentioned a different reason for hiding. Her partner was substantially older than her, so they kept their relationship a secret to avoid judgement, and because of that, she began to feel isolated.

Six participants spoke about moving and how that meant they were isolated from their supports. In some cases, moving was habitual during the relationship, and as Mona suggested, the dyad often became more co-dependent.

Support. This is a subcode of both 'Isolation' and 'Coping and Recovery' which encapsulates how support system access may have changed over time for the PNT towards the end of the relationship. Support from family, friends and community may have been positive or negative throughout or towards the end of the relationship but the experience of support was often complicated and mixed for participants. (Versions of support have been combined below.) For example, some participants had care and validation throughout, while some supports liked the PNTs' partners even after being

made aware of negative behavior. Other supports disliked the PNTs' partners but chose not to bring it up until the relationship was over. In some cases, there was a complete absence of accessible support.

Madeline and Ava noted that support was unavailable during the relationships. They described how their support systems were eroded during the relationship and were replaced by their partner's friends. Dustin (similarly to Cecilia) felt unsupported by his family during his relationship because they were encouraging of making the relationship work while failing to see and to support him:

I talk to my family now and I was like "Guys, I honestly felt you weren't my family." I have to try so hard. And not only am I dealing with her and all the mess that she creates, I'm dealing with my own family, who fails to recognize me.

They failed to recognize what's going on.

Mia and Megan also mentioned that they had less support structures as time went on because of their partner's actions, however, they explained that they also had an active role in pushing people away because of enmeshment in the relationship. Luckily, they were able to renew friendships at the end of the relationship. Like some others, for Claire, aside from one person, no one recognized what she was going through and thought her partner was great, so the tone of support was different than it might have been if people knew the truth all the way along. Ruby's partner, similarly to other INTs, "ingratiated" himself with her support circle so that he appeared "wonderful" and "knowledgeable", and everyone thought he was "amazing". Tara found it "hurtful" that people were buying into her partner's façade and expressed that she did not have that much support because

of it and in some cases was told to “smarten up”. She thought that some friends were getting tired of hearing about her relationship. She stated that one of the areas where she did have support was through her Gamblers Anonymous group (due to her partner’s gambling) where some people “got it” and she learned strategies for how to use with her partner. She was seen as a “rebel” in that era because she was even considering leaving her husband. Wendy spent time painting her relationship as a good situation to her supports, however, at least one person knew the truth of it, and she found that validating at a time where her partner’s treatment of her made her feel incredibly invalidated. She revealed feeling some guilt around telling her friend about these problems but choosing to stay with her partner anyway. Eleanor stated that she went from having a good support base, to moving with her partner and having “zero” support available locally. However, she was able to rebuild support in later years.

Valerie had a friend who detailed her partner’s observable negative behavior in a public space as a warning to her, and this person continued to be there for her in the background even after being pushed aside in favor of believing her partner. This person also observed to Valerie that she had begun to take on some of her partner’s more negative mannerisms and seemed increasingly anxious and moody. She speculated that this friend had gone through her own mental health journey and could recognize the toxicity of the relationship. However, a different friend asked her if she was being a “gold digger” and whether she was with her partner because of his money and social status. Ani felt that family and friends were quiet about what they were seeing because she presented herself as someone who might not listen to that kind of advice on her relationship. She

said that she had friends who were wonderful listeners, but that they did not call out the negative side of things, probably because of this element of her personality.

R: What would have been the best form of support for you do you think? P: For somebody like me, probably calling me out on it and saying, “Come on. This is a story he’s telling you. You know that’s not true. You know in your gut, and if you choose to stick your head in the sand about it, fine. But think about what that looks like in 10 years.” It gets easy to lie to yourself otherwise. (Mona)

Dorian voiced a mixed experience in that he had an amazing group of friends who could tell that he wasn’t himself and validated his experiences. One particular friend supported how “crazy” everything was. However, he also had people who would mock him for his focus on mental health as a man:

The Bell Let’s Talk Day I put something on Facebook and Instagram about it because it’s important to me. And some of my guy friends are like, “What the hell is this? You big crybaby,” and whatever else. And I know they’re kidding, but I go, “But that’s the attitude that needs to stop. “You’re being too sensitive.” Well, that’s just you dismissing somebody.

Vanessa had a mixed experience as well in that as she began to open up in later stages to people about what had been going on and many were very supportive, but she was also told that she had gone too far in giving of herself and some people had little sympathy for that. However, having it pointed out for her that she has had patterns of enabling in other realms, has allowed her to “face some hard truths about giving all of my power and

permission to live to somebody else”. A great deal of her support came from going back to school and getting outside perspectives and validation.

Like some of the other participants, Sophia drew close to her partner’s social circle, and in her case, she developed lasting and supportive friendships with the female partners of his friends, who stuck with her even after the breakup. Nancy did not live in the same area as her parents and felt she had nowhere to go during her relationship but stated that she did have encouragement from friends that she found helpful and that allowed her to feel a bit safer to start asking for her needs eventually. Dawn was impacted enough by her relationship that part way through, her family and friends were concerned enough to do an “intervention”. She stated that she stayed another year and a half because she still had to figure out how to, or if she could leave the father of her child. Una spoke about her amazing family and friends who would listen to her, and she detailed their observations that when she would be away from her partner for a time, that she would come “back to herself”. Only one friend expressed concern about the relationship to her directly, however. Diana felt that family and friends knew what was going on and that they were supportive of her, but not the relationship. Eventually, however, she stated that friends stopped showing up while her family kept protecting her. Brooke spoke about her supportive friends and that she had a few who she could confide in, “I had a good social circle that was really supportive. The one thing I would say is none of my friends enabled me. They listened, but they didn’t enable me.” When Rita would express to friends that she felt that she kept “messing up” in her relationship, they would point out to her that it was more about her partner than about her, “My dear friend

summed it up the best, ‘You’re the only person in his life that holds him accountable, and he hates you for it.’” Jessica spoke of her strong support network of family and friends who were encouraging of her and consistently reminded her to choose herself first. She said that people recognized that things weren’t right and checked in to suggest that she protect herself financially along the way.

A few of the participants’ support circles began to distance themselves because they were uncomfortable with the INT or the dyadic behavior. Robin speculated that this was because they were afraid to interfere. However, she felt that people did want to support her. Unbeknownst to Eleanor, her INT partner was “attacking” people behind the scenes, so she gradually became more isolated as people kept away.

If they could avoid him, they would. Even friends that we had made in [his country] started avoiding him. So, we weren’t invited over if it was going to be the two of us. If somebody said, “[Dawn] hey, you’d want to do this”, but if there was a chance [he] was going to come, then they stopped wanting to do it. (Dawn)

Many of the participants identified that they were able to gain alternate perspectives because of the support of others. Friends helped PNTs to wonder why they were accepting the behaviors:

She was very helpful in that way because she was very honest. And she was someone that I view as having high self-worth. As having this idea that this is how I’m going to be treated. So, I think it was definitely inspiring, even if I wasn’t doing something to change my position. But just to see someone that would have acted differently.

She just called me out on it, and I think for the first time really in a long time she was the one who was, “There’s no excuse for what’s going on.” So, this is sort of almost brand-new information over the last couple of months. She’s helped me sort of see through some of the deception of this. (Vanessa)

Some of the participants found that their supports would be quite vocal about the negativity that they were seeing in the relationships. Una’s friend and family support helped to remind her of her “true self”. Valerie’s friends would point out problematic behaviors and that her partner never gave sincere apologies for it, but rather would use a form of “bribery” in gift-giving after a negative event. Ava’s friend warned her that her partner was cheating on her, and while she chose to give her partner the benefit of the doubt at the time, she was able to face that truth down the road. In Sophia’s case, some of her partners’ friend called him out for his cheating, however, they were willing to extend him “grace” and didn’t necessarily draw a line because of it. Elise’s friends and her sister would spotlight that her partner’s humor was all about making fun of her and would identify when he would say mean things about her.

There’s a few key moments that stand out where people were able to call him out. I think that was really helpful. Anyone who sees it early on gets that gold star in my book. Like, the night of the big blow-up when the [police] came, they pulled us into separate corners of the house and questioned us alone. I remember when the cop who was questioning him came back down to me, he was just laughing. The other police officer and I were like, “What’s going on?” He’s like, “This guy

is so full of shit.” It was a defining moment, and I’ll never forget that because that was one of the first people who saw him for who he was. (Mia)

Not everyone had supports calling out partners’ behaviors. Many of the participants found that family or friends would underplay or minimize the negativity that the PNT was experiencing. Mia felt that often people who had recognized the abuse were willing to ignore it. For example, Ani, Dustin, and Eleanor believed that their support people were pushing them to keep trying to the detriment of understanding what was truly going on, likewise creating a feeling of lack of support. For Iris, the difficulty became that everyone seemed to admire her partner and would say that he was so “wonderful”, “lovely”, and question, “what’s the matter with you?”. She stated that her friends and family loved him, so she started second-guessing herself because everyone thought he was the “greatest person”. She says that even now many family members and friends still think he is wonderful. Valerie cited similar reasons for feeling betrayed by her mom who tried to convince her to stay in the relationship, despite the toxicity:

He had a really close relationship with my mother. Sometimes he would make trips out to see her, get her some flowers. So, my mom definitely had a very different perspective of him than I did. My mom was rather devastated when I told her that I didn’t want to be in a relationship with him. Of course when she asked me why, I told her about the violence, the infidelity, the gaslighting, the disrespect, and the trust that was broken. And she seemed to underplay all those things. Just said, “well, what rich man wouldn’t want to have a side piece? How is it their fault when they start falling into this trap?” And that because we share

this history, I shouldn't feel threatened. The fact that he so openly and earnestly asked me to consider an open relationship shows that he's a very honest person. She definitely had a very different take on the situation than I did. Because of that, I felt really betrayed by my mom. I didn't think that I got the support I needed from her. So, my mom and I, we're actually not very close these days.

Some participants felt that they were given unhelpful advice that was well-meaning but showed a lack of understanding about the situation. Robin stated that not all support is helpful in a PNT-INT breakup because it is not like a normal relationship. For instance, people have advised her to pull back from giving so much, however, she sees that as an important piece of her identity and admires it. The problem was more that her INT partner would take advantage of her giving. Eleanor pointed out that dealing with an INT partner is not as simple as just setting boundaries:

My friend would say to me, "You just don't stand up for yourself. You just need to have a boundary." I heard boundary so many freaking times. So, when she started to experience the behaviors for herself with her wonderful boundaries- at this point, she's cut off the communication with him. But what she did that a lot of people don't do is they stuck it out. So, they were a tremendous support to me, but they didn't start off a support emotionally. They started off very damaging, but they stayed in it long enough to learn what I was up against. In tears cried she said, "I am so, so sorry. I didn't know." "Well, yeah. How would you?"

Several participants attributed their support circles for helping generate strength to leave their relationships. Cecilia mentioned that her girlfriends were her "saving grace" and

that she was grateful for their support. Diana credits her sister with helping her to finally break things off for good one last time, and that she gave her the space to discuss and process recovery. Megan identified her leaving process with a realization after being with a friend, “We were doing a workout together. And I laughed and I was, like, I stopped and then I started crying because I realized that was the first time I had laughed, like a genuine laugh in, like, a year or two.” Jessica talked about how leaving her partner as the hardest things she has ever had to do, including competing in the Olympics, but that her family and friends gave her the strength to leave and a place to stay:

Towards the end, it was my friends and family actually encouraging me to leave.

“You need to get out. This is not okay.” And even his best friend— it was another thing that I had done wrong, and he had torn a strip off me again and I said, “He said this thing to me.” And she goes, “Do you see that that’s not okay that he’s saying that to you? Can you see that?” And, I was like, “Oh.” And she’s known him for decades. For her to be calling out her old friend, you know what I mean? I was like, “You mean that’s not right. Maybe it’s not okay that he’s talking to me like that.” So, I felt very well supported through the whole thing. And it was really the support of my family and friends that gave me the strength to get out.

That was the hardest thing. Like going to two Olympic games was easier than that relationship. If I didn’t close that door, my life would be horrific right now.

Interestingly, at the end of many of the relationships, even support systems that had not been fully present throughout often stepped in to help once the PNT had made the decision to leave. Mia was able to renew the friendships she had been isolated from, and

a girlfriend gave her a place to stay. Kyla felt her family was terrified for her and continually checked in on her because of her partner's lies about her wellbeing. Friends offered encouragement and her family gave her unconditional support. Claire also counted on friends for a place to stay and Iris's family and friends helped her to move.

It did surprise me that there was only one friend who ever actually said during that relationship, "I'm worried about you that this is not going well." And that's always kind of surprised me because post-relationship there was this collective sigh of relief from everyone around me. "Okay, she's really not getting back together with him. We can all breathe again." But people were very willing to be there for me. Having people who were willing to stand there and remind me of who I was and all the things that were interesting about me. And to be there and engage in those things with me, that was a huge thing. Also, my family were constantly there for me. (Una)

Dustin felt that his family finally began to recognize the toxicity of the relationship and to understand his position. He now has support where he felt like he didn't previously. Rita felt that her relationship would have never happened in the way that it did if she had access to friendships in the beginning, like she did at the end. One of her close relationships did not survive the relationship, however. Friends noted that after the breakup, her "joie de vivre" returned. Many of Morgan's new social circle began to clue into what was happening in her relationship towards the end and she went from having few supports, to a now very large pool of people in her life who watch out for her and care about her. Ava had not told anyone about the circumstances of her relationship until

the end. She began to develop good friendships in the final stages of her relationship and realized that she was gaining independence due to an increased focus on herself.

However, some supports were not as reliable at the end. Valerie felt she had to distance herself because her family remained close to her ex. Vanessa revealed:

Now I'm out from behind the shadows and I'm trying to reclaim bits of my own life. But I'm noticing that some people don't like it. Some people don't feel comfortable about it. And some people don't want to even talk about it. So, I don't get the validation that, "hey, I'm going to do something for myself." I'm starting to wonder if I have any friends that are really friends. I started to really question a lot of my relationships and what I'm allowed to have or not. Nothing feels okay right now.

Many of the participants' supports revealed that they had been aware of the abuse, however, had chosen not to say anything about it until the breakup. Mia noted that, "then for every one person who sees it, there's 20 people who turn a blind eye to it." Tara stated that having people vocalize what they had seen helped her to feel less "crazy". Cecilia had been ignoring much of the negative behavior and had been pretending that everything was ok but found out after the breakup that people had seen right through that. Various people let Morgan know about her partner's cheating after the breakup. Ani said, "My father saw him coming out of a store with the girl holding hands. Never said a thing to him and never said a thing to me. He told me once I told my parents I was getting a divorce." Also:

I remember the day that I got married standing outside the church waiting to enter, and my father looked at me and said, “Are you sure you want to do this?” I remember thinking, “If only the doors had stayed closed for another 10 seconds, I probably wouldn’t have walked down the aisle.” And in each of my experiences as I told people that I was getting divorced, they all went, “Oh, finally.” No one was saying it. They were like, “We are going to leave her to figure this out on her own, because we’re not going to be able to convince her anyway.”

Ava also provided some examples of finding out that people did recognize the negativity, and detailed that she was able to find a unique form of support with her mother at that point because she had been through a similar situation with Ava’s father:

Definitely some were very shocked. A lot of my friends said they never really liked him because they saw that I wasn’t my carefree self around him. Some [spoke up], like that friend that was trying to tell me he cheated on me and treated me bad, but I didn’t listen to her. Some spoke up, some didn’t. When I called my mum to tell her that we’re separating, she wasn’t surprised. The more I had read about narcissism, the more her and I connected over very similar situations we had both been in. And because she was still healing from my parent’s divorce, I think me sharing with her what I had been through also helped her heal wounds she didn’t know she was dealing with.

Most participants remarked that having support was one of the most crucial elements to their recovery from the relationship. Robin was gradually finding out more information about how her partner had discredited her behind her back, and she needed her family and

friends' support to get through hearing about it and to process what had gone on. These days, she said that she has her friends evaluate her new dates so that she won't be vulnerable to someone like her ex again. Elise's brother called and mentioned her unhappiness at the end and offered to pay for a lawyer for her divorce. Megan's parents paid for therapy for her, and she reconnected with the friends that she had been isolated from and made new friends who were there to share experiences without judgement. Dawn's family and friends were there throughout her separation process and helping to shelter her. Brooke's friends helped her to start doing things that were focused on herself again instead of her ex, including signing up for a dating service. She said that opened up her horizons again and she met her eventual husband that way. Cecilia confessed that she may have returned to her partner if she did not have the support and knowledge that she received, saying, "I may not have survived it. I probably would have taken him back.":

When everything fell apart, those were the ones that didn't do the whole, "I told you so." They were there to hold my hand. There were days I felt broken and bleeding. And I couldn't do it. I couldn't fight anymore. I couldn't think anymore. I just wanted to crawl in a hole and die. And they were the ones that helped me up. They were the ones that kept me on track and kept me grounded and kept me focused. Every day so grateful. Like beyond grateful.

Nancy expressed just how important it was to her to have a "village" of support in her breakup, in particular one friend who allowed her to "let it all out". Through the process of "releasing" it all, she articulated that the negativity of the relationship became "less loud". The extra support has allowed her to reverse some of the damage. Eleanor

emphasized that people need strong supports to help them identify what is going on through the confusion that these kinds of relationships create and what the confusion might mean. The support would also help in being able to walk away from the relationship when feeling certain things and would give people understandable reasons to do so. Rita highlighted that it is so important to have back-up plans and support going into relationships in case people have to face these kinds of things. Elise spoke about the kind of support that she is now interested in having, “I just want to populate my life with people who make me feel good about who I am. Not ashamed I guess.”

Wedges. This subcode of ‘Isolation’ delineates the deliberate attempts that at least 22 INTs made to actively isolate their partners from their support systems. The endeavors to put wedges between PNTs and their support systems ranged from subtle suggestions or actions, while some were very overt and aggressive. There was a large manipulative element to most of the events.

An example of a very covert method of wedging was mentioned by Tara. Her partner would do things such as dominate social conversations so that she would not have the opportunity to participate. One way that this would happen in a group setting is he would step in front of her to prevent her from talking to or being visible to others. In other subtle instances, INTs would require their partners to move away from social supports, or not to move closer to social supports. Some of the participants spoke about the subtle comments their partners would make, such as Madeline, who’s partner wanted her to change behaviors and drop her friends. He would use “passive-aggressive” remarks to imply dislike of the people in her social circle and of the area that they lived, “he kept

saying he's "allergic to the suburbs." Una got the distinct sense that spending time with her family was not ok, and she adjusted her behavior accordingly:

But [activities] were definitely focused on his preferences, more so than mine. That showed up in things like visiting my family. I always felt like I had to apologize or make it a very short trip or, there wasn't a lot of enthusiasm for doing anything with my family.

Rita was often left to deal with the aftermath of her partner's negative social behaviors, such as making them late to gatherings or inconsideration of others. Rita expressed that her partner might walk in jovially and start socializing while she was left trying to explain why they were running very late, for example, without using socially-inappropriate blame. In a specific instance, she felt that her partner deliberately allowed her to take the heat for his mistakes:

I said, "I'm Dan's wife. It's so good to meet you." She rants at me for 10 minutes that she's been trying to track him down by phone calls and emails and he hasn't gotten back to her. It's insulting and it's offensive and it's put them behind. He's being super rude. And I'm stunned. I don't think he knew any of this. Of course, he knew because he's got all these messages. And I'm apologizing as one does for your husband. He knew all along. "You threw me under the bus, backed up the bus, threw me back under the bus. Who does that to their partner? You literally sent me out to take the hit for you." "No, no, no that's just..." "Can I get an apology?" "Apology? Are you kidding?" And it was that sense of, "Oh my God, my husband just held my neck under water while someone else drowned

me. What is that?" I didn't know what to call that. So, this was the perfect example of the curse of his charm- he's good looking and he's funny.

At times, some of the INTs would try to manufacture discord between PNTs and friends or family members, either to isolate or to get something they wanted. In Dorian's situation, his partner would accuse him of something, and then tell him that all his friends agreed with her. She would also tell him stories about her family to paint them as villains, to gain sympathy, and to manipulate him into certain choices. As a result, he thought of her family as bad people for a long time before realizing the truth.

Very sneakily separating your friends and family. He was a master; he kept his family away from me by telling me lies about them. Always bad things they did to him. I just know what he's telling me. Why would I ever doubt it? And then, he would tell me things that he was noticing about our friends. His best friend's wife for example hated him. "Did you see what she said? Did you see how she looked at me?" He would attack people behind the scenes. So, they would feel uncomfortable and not want to come to the house anymore. But I would never know why, until after we separated. I just knew that some people just seemed to be really busy and didn't want to come over or didn't have time to come over. Didn't realize that they were scared. But they didn't realize they were scared either. They just thought they had done something so bad and so wrong that they weren't welcome in the house. (Eleanor)

Robin never found out what the truth really was:

He said all our friends thought I was a vile person, that I treated him really bad, that I was just so negative they didn't want to be around. I don't know if that's true, or if he was telling them things about me so they would have that perception.

Ava's partner implied that he didn't want her to discuss their relationship with others, which meant that she had no outside perspectives to judge normality until the end, "Thinking of it now, his pet peeve was me discussing our relationship with other people. So that's probably also why I kept it so silent." Mia's partner did not want her to spend time with other people, even for innocuous activities such as studying, so he would manufacture excuses to prevent her from going out, for example, pretending to be ill:

I think it must've been intentional, but I still can't really see where it came from.

There were a couple times where I was set to do something with friends, and he either double booked us or suddenly fell sick. So, I stayed home...weird things like that, but it wasn't super apparent. R: So, he didn't overtly say, "I don't like this person. I don't want to hang out with them." P4: No, no.

Iris's partner feigned continual delays to prevent her from purchasing a plane ticket to go see her family in favor of spending time with his. Because of this, her father passed away before she could visit. Elise acknowledged that her partner's negative comments about her family worked, and it created distance between them for a time. Her partner's unfair negativity towards her support people began even from their first date. "We went out and I was, like, "Isn't this nice that Tina introduced us? She's such a great woman, da, da, da." And then he said, 'She's not such a great woman. She's actually a horrible person.'" Brooke spoke about how her partner attempted to break her away from her long-term,

core friendships by talking badly about them and manipulate the dynamics through insinuations and lies. Sophia's partner verbally attacked her extended family and seemed to take pride in creating a wedge, "He said to me, "You would still be hanging out with shits like this person and this person if it wasn't for me." These people are my cousins."

My friend was very concerned. She would try to remind me time and time again, and that this is probably not a healthy relationship. It's very toxic. And that's when he would convince me that perhaps it was my friend who wasn't good for me. He would start telling me that my friends had various deficiencies. That they probably didn't have my best interests at heart. That they were perhaps jealous of my relationship with him and any sort of red flags that they saw, that they tried to warn me about, were really just within their imagination and unfounded. So, it created so much of a problem between my friends and him that I felt like I had to choose between hanging out with my friends or him. Because at some point, they just can't be in the same environment. (Valerie)

Protecting and Covering. Part of the 'Isolation' that PNTs were feeling was related to not divulging what was happening in the relationship to others. The emotional abuse felt humiliating to many participants and was often subtle or a combination of cumulative events that were hard to explain. Many PNTs were not sure (until things became really negative later) if they were the ones causing the problems. This and a sense of loyalty meant that at least 17 of the participants protected or covered things up for the INTs to keep people from seeing what was going on.

Similarly, to others, Una identified, “I didn’t share a lot. That was my choice of not always wanting to colour people’s opinions of him. Protecting again.” Mia did not want to let others in on what was happening, saying, “I had been putting on this show for everybody for several years about how everything was fine.”

I would try to keep him accountable, “You’re an hour and a half late to friends for dinner. We should apologize when we walk in the door.” “No, no, I talked to Scott. He’s fine with it. It doesn’t matter.” And the wife would draw me aside and say, “It’s kind of uncool you guys are an hour and a half late.” And, I would have to decide, do I sell out my husband or do I say, “Yeah, sorry we’re just really busy.” And so, I always felt like my values were in conflict. Where part of my values is to back up the people I love. Part of my values is to be honest and not be an enabler. And so, my role was to get smaller, complain, get angry, try to pick my battles and be really confused and shut down. (Rita)

Megan did not want others to know just how bad thing had gotten:

I couldn’t tell anything to anybody. So, no one knew what was going on. I just disappeared out of my friend’s lives. From a bird’s eye view, all my friends were seeing me, “Wow, she’s building this company. She’s doing exactly what we all wanted to do. That looks so awesome.” It was so messed up and horrendous.

Jessica’s support system let her know that they were seeing things they didn’t like in the relationship, and she would respond back with excuses to protect her partner:

“You know that’s not okay, right? Do you see that that is not okay for somebody to speak to anybody like that?” I would be like, “Oh, it’s fine. It’s fine. He’s just

stressed or whatever.” I just hate making excuses for him, trying to be more understanding and be more flexible and be more relaxed.

Several the participants indicated a feeling of responsibility to their partners. Megan realized in hindsight that she was showing loyalty to her partner at the expense of herself:

Our bookkeeper would send me email links about emotional abuse. And I remember that I would laugh, and then I would be, like, no. I was in such denial, and I was so protective over him despite everything. I don’t even want to call it loyalty because that’s loyalty to him maybe, but not to myself.

Some participants protected their partners’ behaviors out of shame (see the ‘Shame’ code). Dawn did not want people to know about the “appallingly bad mistake” that she had made, and she did not want to others to worry about how terrifying it sometimes was. In Megan’s case, she did not even want to reveal what was going on to her therapist:

I lied to my therapist because I just said it was all about my parents. I knew exactly what to say to her to make sure that she wouldn’t dive into any of my relationship stuff. I just made it like he’s very supportive. He knows everything, blah, blah. So that she didn’t touch that with a ten-foot pole, and she didn’t.

Lack of Understanding. This is a subcode of ‘Isolation’ that indicates limited understanding from others of what the PNT is experiencing in their relationships leading to less or no support. Participants suggested that it was difficult for people to understand the effects of the cumulative buildup of the emotional abuse (EA) over time and explaining that one discrete event often would not seem like much to people hearing about it. This EA was often subtle and hard to explain especially in the face of a

“charming” or “nice” façade that most of the INTs portrayed. As well, the PNTs faced reduced credibility to others because of being discredited by their partners or the erosion of their self-esteem. 17 participants reported that there was a lack of understanding from their support systems during and sometimes post-relationship.

Jessica pointed out that while she has great support systems, a lot of her friends had no basis for comparison in relating to her relationship as they had not gone through something like she did. Dorian felt that as a physically large, male survivor of the emotional abuse, that people framed things differently when they responded to him, from a one-sided point of view wherein it was difficult to view him as a victim. Robin felt that people genuinely didn't understand the depth of trauma and isolation that could come from being with an INT person. People could not understand how big the barrier to leaving due to eroded self-esteem and sense of safety is, and thus revictimization:

I feel a lot of people after breakups that end negatively are like “Oh, he’s a psycho”, but they don’t really understand what that means. They don’t understand the devastation that being with somebody like that causes. I feel like that’s a part of my identity now. You can read the textbooks, the classical signs of a narcissist, and you can recite them to me, and even in that, I don’t fully understand [your] experience with it. I felt really strongly that a lot of people couldn’t understand my experience, because it’s just surreal. I tell them things and you can read it on their face. They’re just either “This chick is crazy and it’s bullshit” or they’re like “She’s stupid. If it’s so bad, so why did she stay?” It’s not understood as well as I

think it should be and that leads to a lot of revictimization. People don't really understand how deep the trauma goes.

Eleanor said, "It took me 15 years to start grasping what was going on. So, how can I expect them to understand it in a year or two? So, they had me to interpret for them". As well, people tend to lump both partner's behavior together as a dyad that reflects on each of them no matter who perpetrated the behavior.

One of the most damaging aspects is there's no language for it. Because what do you tell people? I lovingly refer to it as the "mind fuck". It's powerful. And it's really hard to catch onto. I'm being emotionally abused. I'm being gaslit. I'm being crushed under the weight of my energy being sucked dry. If you have a language for it, then all of a sudden, it makes sense.

A number of the participants felt that they had to justify their decision to leave their partners or that people didn't believe what had happened in the relationships. Ruby expressed that she had an awareness of constant judgement. Kyla felt people wouldn't understand because they all liked her partner, and this led her to feeling that she had to justify her decision to leave:

I think I projected that they wouldn't understand. Because whenever I told anybody that we were breaking up and what was going on, they would all say, "but he was so nice". He was such a great guy and didn't see it at all. So, I would constantly feel like I had to justify my decision to people because they thought that he was this amazing person.

Cecilia felt she needed definitive evidence to receive support for her decision to leave:

I really hope that the more stuff that gets out there for people that have gone through this, they will be able to recognize that, “yeah, I am a victim. I do deserve validation. I do deserve to be recognized. And I do deserve the help to get through it.” Instead of, “Just ignore it.”

A few felt that they wouldn't be believed or that they still aren't. Iris pointed out that it takes years to collect evidence of emotional abuse and the various conflict situations and to present things cohesively, saying, “it's now six years out since the divorce. It's unbelievable. And I still wonder whether some of my friends think that I'm lying. Because they just didn't see that side of that person.”

Even with some of my other friends who had met him, they were very surprised to learn that we had broken up. And they didn't believe in my narrative when I told them about the verbal abuse, the physical abuse, the infidelity, and him wanting to be in a polygamous relationship. (Valerie)

Reinforced Manipulation. This is a sub-category of ‘Emotionally Abused’ comprising of the codes ‘Lied to’, ‘Cheated On’, and ‘Enabling’ which represents the ways in which the INT or their enablers created conditions to strengthen manipulations within the relationships.

Lied To. All participants observed that their partners would change the narrative from reality to suit their purposes in a moment. This served to cause confusion for PNTs, to have them question their own sense of understanding, or to feel like they were crazy. Some of the possible motivations suggested included to get something INTs wanted, to

normalize negative behavior (pushing boundaries in the process), to devalue or discredit the PNT, or to watch the effect on the PNT, possibly for their own amusement.

A few times INT partners lied in the beginning about their relationship status, and a strong majority of the INT partners lied so that they could cheat on participants (see ‘Cheated On’ below). As well, several participants noted that the INT lied about past relationships to make out their former partners as the “bad guy” of the situation, often claiming that past partners perpetrated actions that the INTs did themselves. Participants found these things out because they either got into touch with past partners or saw the same patterns after the breakup regarding other relationships that the INT engaged in.

Perhaps some of the more egregious examples come from Claire and Sophia whose partners lied in elaborate, ongoing ways about having cancer. They now identify that this was used as a tool of manipulation, and at the time, they did not want to question their partner on the discrepancies because they very much wanted to be a good support for their partners. When Morgan’s partner lied about illnesses to manipulate her into doing what he wanted and he was caught out, he would justify and deny. Ani’s partner had a secret child that he and his family knew about, but that she found out about through other sources after their marriage. Mona’s partner lied about suicide attempts, she feels, to manipulate her. She said that she couldn’t “call his bluff” because she knew other people who had killed themselves and didn’t want to risk being wrong about her instincts.

Several participants believe that their former partners are compulsive liars. Dawn said, “I’ve learned everything is a lie. Their entire existence is a lie”. Mona affirmed that she could put the truth of the situation “right in front of his face and he wouldn’t even

admit it". After the breakup he presented himself as the victim in their relationship and claimed she had cheated on him when in fact he had been doing the one to do that. Rita was fairly disturbed by the recognition that her partner had the ability to lie and to believe it, calling that realization "horrifying". Some of the lies she detailed included social consideration, money (including hiding it from her), and generally to get his own way:

That's actually how I was trying to work this through- he has all of these wonderful qualities, I loved the time we just spent together, I'm married, I can't move back to my perfect apartment, I have no money, we're having a disagreement about something pretty high stakes, we're going back to very stressful lives and...the person beside me in this beautiful car just lied to my face to get his own way. And he didn't agree that he'd done so, rather he shrugged and said I must have misunderstood about the one detail that had caused me to give in. WHAT DO I DO WITH THIS INFORMATION? I had no algorithm for this.

Iris was told that she legally could not be on the title to the family home because as a stay-at-home-mother, she had not made a financial contribution at the time. Megan also gave numerous examples of her partner's lies, from using falsehoods to gradually force her out of their business, to falsely calling himself an Olympic athlete in public. She affirmed that some of the lies presented actual danger to clients because he was giving serious health recommendations without education or experience.

Many INTs seemed to have no problem lying to the court either. For instance, Iris had been the stay-at-home parent, yet during their divorce, her partner claimed that he was the 100% sole caregiver of their children. He was eventually caught in these lies:

He tried to say that he was 100% caregiver, and he doctored all his travel – he stole all my diaries and all that. And so, his credit card statements would say he had done a rental car and a hotel let's say in [city] on these dates but yet there was no flight to go there. And just stuff like that. So, he was caught lying.

Dawn stated that her partner also lied about being the primary caregiver to get full custody, but that it was made easier for him because she was also the primary breadwinner. She had to fight to get more appropriate custodial rights back. Many of the other PNTs found out that their former partners had been lying to them after the relationship was over and that they were discredited to others.

Cheated On. This subcode indicates that the INT cheated on the participant at some point or had a pattern of cheating in intimate relationships. Often the participants were met with denial or called crazy for being suspicious. Certain of the INTs moved from being covert about their cheating behaviors to overt and seemed to be testing PNT boundaries of belief. 19 of the participants were cheated on. As well, five PNTs knew or found out that their partner was with already with someone else in a committed way while starting their own relationships, in a couple cases there was long-term overlap.

Robin identified that her partner had been dating behind her back even during his attempts to reconcile with her he was seeing someone else. Megan professed that there had been a lot of “sketchy stuff” happening between her partner and his ex. At one point, a woman's husband smashed down their door because of an affair her INT partner was having. Ruby realized her partner had a pattern of seducing vulnerable women.

Wendy found out part-way in that her partner had a girlfriend when they began their relationship, but he seemed to be able to justify that away. Brooke was told by her partner that his marriage wasn't doing well and that he was looking forward to her being a stepmom to his kids. This never happened, and she realized that he was setting things up for cheating with other people even before their own relationship was over.

A few of the participants felt their partner was game-playing with their cheating. Diana thought her partner felt it was fun to cheat in the open and cause pain, "I think that became a game for him to cheat on me in front of me". Morgan thought her partner wanted to be caught and he was continually pushing the boundaries to see what he could get away with or get her to believe. He used denial when she would find evidence. He seemed to want her to feel jealousy:

Even when I found the dress in his closet, he played it off as, "I have no idea." And there was an open condom packet. So, it was right there. But I feel like it was planted. I feel like he was happy when I almost fainted because it was five years into the relationship. I saw a smirk, and I remember just really feeling heavy and I didn't even know what to say. My mouth wanted to lip the words, "Are you cheating on me?" But they weren't coming out. I couldn't muster the courage to ask and partly, maybe I didn't want to hear the answer.

A couple of the INTs tried to blame their affairs on the participants. Dawn found out that her partner had been having numerous affairs because he would have to go to "work" somewhere overnight, but would have no money in the bank and tried to convince her that an STI was actually a bladder infection. When she challenged him, she

was told she was the one flirting, lying, and looking elsewhere. Several PNTs considered at least one of their partner's affairs to be the end point. For instance, Mia mentioned feeling grateful for the cheating because it prompted her to leave.

Many of the participants didn't find out about the cheating until the end of their relationships, or they were willing to give their partners the benefit of the doubt. Sophia expressed that it had never occurred to her that her partner was cheating on her. She said that his infidelities were enabled by travelling all the time and his access to ample funds. It turned out that he had been cheating throughout the entire relationship, and it wasn't until she found proof that she realized it.

Enabling. In at least 13 circumstances, INT family and friends helped to create an environment of self-importance for the INT and supported their perspective under any circumstances. The INT may have purposefully surrounded themselves with people such as this, meaning that PNT perspectives became lost in the face of one-sided points of view. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as "flying monkeys". (INTs collecting people around them who would do their bidding.)

For instance, Robin spoke about how her partner would be allowed to take credit for his friends' efforts:

He was pretty charming when I met him. He did a lot of things, getting me flowers and my favourite take-out meal, but then I find out that wasn't actually him. He got a friend to do that and set it up for him and took the credit. He would cook me this nice meal, and then I'd find out that it was a friend, again, that came and cooked this meal for him, and he took the credit for it.

Kyla believed that her partner was enabled by family and friends to not have to take on responsibility in their dyad. Sophia explains her partner's deliberate choice to surround himself with people he felt a power-differential with:

The people that he hangs out with now... we call them his minions. They're single guys. They don't make as much money as him. He's kind of the leader of the pack. Whereas the other guys, when we were all friends, one of them is a lawyer, one of them is a doctor. They're married, and they have money for a house, whereas these people that are his really, really close friends that kind of went with him are a little bit lesser than him.

Diana stated that her partner's friends would make excuses for him to her:

People being his friend and also being manipulated by him, to the point that they would lie for him to me. His friends started trying to apologize for him, saying that John wants to talk to me and all that stuff and he's so sorry for everything.

Almost all participants who reported enabling, mentioned that INT families held some responsibility in that regard. Kyla faced verbal attacks from her partner's family and was blamed for perceived wrongs. Jessica felt her partner learned his behavior from his father and was enabled by his mother who would sweep negative behaviors under the rug saying, "Oh dear. Just don't worry, everything is going to be fine." Iris found that her partner's parents would check up on her on her partner's behalf:

He had his parents move here and move upstairs; their apartment looked straight into ours. His mother is also, I think, a narcissist and, very controlling. So, they would constantly be over. They had the key to our place without me being asked.

They can walk in and out whenever they wanted. I remember coming home sometimes and I put on a jacket I hadn't worn in 10 years and his mother saying, "Oh, you bought a new jacket. I see you're spending the family money." And rubbish like that. And, watching everything that I'm doing, coming and going.

Dustin relayed the results of a typical conversation that he had with his in-laws, "I actually went to see her parents and I was like, "You know, there needs to be accountability for the stuff that she does." She's like, 'Our daughter is perfect. There is nothing wrong with her. It's only you.'" Rita felt that things were always "three-on-one" with her partner and his parents saying one thing, and her believing another. She found that anyone who held her partner accountable would have been removed from his life:

The curse he has is not one person said to him, (preferably a man). "You know what? Kind of uncool to keep us waiting 45 minutes." He'd distance himself from anyone that held him accountable. But someone needed to say, "You know what? You're buying us drinks tonight. You just kept 12 people waiting 45 minutes. That's not cool." No one did it, ever. So, I got to be that person. That went well. That went really, really well. And here we are now.

In summary, the emotional abuse that occurred during the relationships was often very subtle and evolved over time as boundaries were gradually shifted. Overt emotional abuse began to occur in many of the dyads after some time, sometimes resulting in physical violence. Participants were left feeling uncertain and anxious about much of the unpredictability, but also were aware of the likelihood of extreme and intimidating reactions from their INT partners to any opposition. The manipulative nature of this

abuse was strongly present and occurred both in private and public spaces. Participants were often left feeling that they were always to blame, never good enough, and isolated from supports, at times due to being surrounded by people who only supported the INT.

Incentivized

This main code refers to the cycle that the INT might initiate if they felt the PNT may be stepping away from the relationship, which entailed taking action to do or say the right things to pull the PNT back into the dyad. All participants reported some form of incentivization, mainly through justifications or excuses, promises, or strategic wooing.

For example, Mia believes her partner knew exactly when she was pulling away, and he would make a “conscious” grand gesture to bind her to the relationship, such as a proposal, house, and family:

I think there’s a clear period where I could’ve and should’ve left, but each time that I was getting itchy feet, something would happen... “someone” would control the situation to stop it. I was unhappy at one point but wasn’t communicating that and was looking at getting out of the relationship and how to do that, and then he proposed. It just seemed to keep happening like that. Or then we bought a house together. So, things like that just kind of kept me in, I guess. I think they were conscious.

Justified. This is a subcode of ‘Incentivized’ indicating rationalizations, excuses, and denials that allow any negative behavior that the PNT may have observed from the INT to be justified away in favor of maintaining the relationship and to avoid

accountability. 21 of the participants reported their partner using justifications to excuse poor conduct.

Robin discussed how often her partner was able to convince her that his actions were reasonable and could rationalize away her upset. In one example she gave, this happened when he neglected to pick her up after a surgery, but somehow made it seem ok after letting her down. Similarly, Cecilia's partner did not show up at the hospital after her ectopic pregnancy. He had gone to a friend's house to play Xbox with the excuse that he needed time away for himself. He was also able to justify his increasing contact with other women. Claire said her partner always had a good explanation for his behaviour:

He would explain it. He would justify his choices but also go, "yeah, that sucks. I understand that that wasn't the best thing." But definitely preface it with, all the reasons why it was the right choice for me to do. The way that he would explain them, the way that he would switch things around, I'd be, "oh yeah, sure that makes sense." And then now in hindsight go, "my god". But he was so, so good at explaining something.

Megan's partner was readily able justify her discovery of other women's things in their bed, "He'd make up things like, 'How dare you blame me for that. Obviously for all you know they're just a client's stuff that I was holding in my pocket, and I laid in bed with it, and it fell out.'" Valerie echoed, "Of course, whenever I confronted him about the questionable behaviour, he always had an explanation for it." She explained away her partner's harsh treatment of her because she wanted to believe the best of him:

Because we weren't in a romantic relationship, I thought the questionable behaviors were only limited to the work environment. But once we were in an intimate relationship, those work-related frustrations and negativity would spill over to his personal life as well. I truly felt that he had my best interests at heart. That's why he was so critical of me, and that's why he pushed me to do the things that I wouldn't have done on my own.

Many of the INTs would justify their misdeeds by claiming they were misunderstood. Tara's partner would often say to her, "that is not what I meant" when she would question his words or intent or completely deny saying something. Rita said her partner would justify things by shrugging and saying that she must have misunderstood the one detail that had caused her to give in. Some were told that they were always overreacting or making too big a deal of things. Others found that their partners were very skilled in making them feel sorry for their INT's situation.

Promised. This subcode of 'Incentivized' indicates the promises that at least 13 INTs made to keep the PNT intertwined in the relationship. These might be promises of future happiness or success, or presenting images of a perfect future life together, including marriage, family, trips, and material items. Often when the PNT began gaining independence or would be contemplating leaving the relationship, the INT would respond with promises of a grand gesture, but not necessarily follow through.

Valerie's partner incentivized her with promises of the future home and family and as a variety of gifts once married. Ani said there was always a next big thing that he would be promising despite spending all their money on himself. Jessica was given

multiple promises for future financial help, marriage, family, and her partner kept delaying the promised wedding, she believes, to strategically keep her in the relationship.

Morgan's partner also used promises of a beautiful life and marriage as "bait":

He told me that he wanted something really beautiful in the future as well. So, that's what got me hooked over time, that dream for a happy family (which I may have had and not even known myself), he kind of picked up on that and then, just used it to my disadvantage.

Megan's partner would paint pictures of being wealthy and living the high life, he would talk about them running a highly successful business together and she said these promises of the future were very strategic and hooked her into the relationship so that she would keep spending her money and effort on 'their' dreams. She said all of these promises were, "very empty and purposeful".

"I'm going to take care of you, and everything is going to be fine. Just stick with me. We're in this together. We're going to buy a new house and it has to be like this." He would say all these things whenever things would get a little bit tricky at the beginning. They were things that I wanted, and I wanted it to work; the picture we had painted together, especially at the beginning. He reiterated over and over we'd be this successful business couple and I could choose when I wanted to work and when I didn't, raise kids, have this life, and go traveling. He would recognize these are important to me. Never happened.

Brooke also mused, “It’s funny when I think back, there wasn’t a lot that we actually did. There was a lot of talk about promises, about going on a trip, about doing this, about doing that. But none of that ever happened.”

Strategically Wooed. This subcode of ‘Incentivized’ indicates a doubling down on love bombing and wooing behavior. This may include apologies and acknowledgement of poor treatment, also demonstrating that the INTs had awareness of the impact of their behaviors on PNTs and were making a choice to engage in poor treatment regardless. This would take place as a direct response to PNTs pulling away from the relationship or gaining a sense of independence. 18 participants reported their partners wooing them back in after rocky times, which may have otherwise prompted them to leave.

Claire found that after a major upset, her partner was, suddenly, willing to offer deeper commitment:

Suddenly it was like I was his focus. That shifted things completely, from, “we’re just dating, and it feels somewhat casual”, to “you’re my life”. There was a period of mistrust and then a period of him being, what felt like quite transparent, quite open, very caring, and very attentive. That felt nice. That shift definitely felt nice.

Valerie’s partner would do his best to woo her back with gifts after a fight, “even when he gave me gifts, so say if I was upset at him for sexting another girl, he would show up the next day with some nice flowers and a nice purse and hope that’s the end of it.” Mia described an abusive cycle of blowouts and her partner wooing her back in through overcompensation. He would attempt to win her back in through apologies and good behaviour. She gave him the benefit of the doubt but continued to plan her exit strategy.

Megan identified multiple times in her relationship where she could tell that her partner had sensed that she was pulling away and began serious wooing behaviors:

He did that right when I was pulling away because I was seeing him with that other woman. He would do this all the time where he'd go do something super grandiose whenever I'd pull back and be, like, I don't know if this is right anymore. If I was advantageous to him, he would ramp up the compliments or treating me... and then he would go off and do something grandiose if I wasn't coming back fast enough. Then he started talking about how we're getting ready for marriage and how we've been looking at rings and stuff like that. And started talking about this baby again. And telling the whole family.

Diana had decided that she was through with the relationship multiple times, however, her partner would enmesh her again with romantic gestures. He continued to reach out to her even two years after they had broken up, saying that he missed her and apologizing, asking her to be in his life again. Eleanor found out that her partner was backhanded in his efforts (as he admitted to friends), "My partner smeared my name all over the place. Told the craziest lies. Then went around apologizing to get me back and then, went around saying he had to apologize because that's the only way I'd have him back."

Wendy related that when she did break up with her partner he said, "Oh I'll change. I'll go to therapy." She articulated that, "he suddenly actually understood everything that had bothered me, and he said it to me as if he finally realized it. But I think looking back, he knew it all along." She realized that he was a narcissist because of how strategic it was to suddenly be saying and doing all the right things when she was finally leaving.

Benefit of the Doubt. This is a subcode of ‘Justified’, ‘Promised’ and ‘Strategically Wooed’ representing the PNT’s continued decision to stay in the relationship, despite increasingly negative behaviors, and as a response to the above codes. The PNT may have already begun to question their own perceptions of events due to INT manipulation and may have been facing normalized negative behavior within the dyad, therefore giving higher credence to a more forceful INT perspective. 21 participants reported giving their partners the benefit of the doubt in situations where they might not have otherwise accepted the credibility of the explanation or behavior.

Annie was one of those participants, “Rationalized and justified [instincts], and normalized them, and really told myself a story.” Dawn decided her partner’s extreme jealousy was due to being in a different environment, and the strength of their feelings. She would excuse his behaviour because she figured he was adjusting. Jessica decided her partner seemed like a reasonable guy most other situations, so she excused his behaviour to herself and to others. She has now reached the conclusion that she made too many excuses for him and needed to be paying more attention. Robin couldn’t face the idea that somebody she loved would want to cause her distress:

Too scary to consider someone you love would want to harm. I think that the first couple times it was like “Wow, that was hurtful”, but I was like “That must not have been how he intended it” and you kind of rationalize it. When you have an idea that you love somebody and somebody loves you and they repeatedly tell you something, you think it’s in your best interest, you don’t think “Oh, this

person is saying something that's just cruel and mean and manipulative, and he's doing it deliberately. If I had known it was deliberate, I wouldn't be sitting here. Some of the participants indicated that they closed their eyes to the situation or chose to stay in denial. Diana acknowledged, "I just really was good at suppressing it, I guess, and being in denial and trying to tell myself that he wouldn't do this to me.

I had friends that did try and say something. And those friends weren't my friends anymore. I chose to believe him. He was my husband. And that's really sad. Which is why I'm glad that a few of those relationships have been mended because it needed to happen. I was just so afraid of the truth. I didn't want to believe it, so it's easier to just look away, right? (Cecilia)

A couple of the participants spoke about giving their partners the benefit of the doubt out of empathy. Ava excused her partner's behaviour due to his past trauma, for example. Vanessa came to the conclusion that she had a pattern of enabling people's unacceptable behaviour by making excuses for them. She said that she believed everything that was told to her by her partner, until she couldn't believe it anymore:

I made excuses for a lot of different people. Now it's becoming a real problem for me. I realize that this is something I have to face... there's patterns that are coming up where I'm seeing that I've enabled a lot of this kind of behaviour. And I continue to make excuses for these types of people.

Mainly, participants wanted to believe that their partners had the best intentions for them and the relationship and were thus willing to give INTs the benefit of the doubt.

This was facilitated by skilled INT efforts to justify away behaviors, by promising, and reverting to the loving and caring behaviors that helped to intensify the dyads.

Self View- During

This main code encapsulates the way the participants viewed themselves during the period in the relationship where they have become privy to their partner's full complement of personality traits and behaviors which may have been masked previously. The 'Rollercoaster' cycle of ups and downs of the relationship have been taking place for a while by this point.

Kyla compared her situation to her partner's family and felt that they were headed down a similarly dysfunctional path, with no financial control or outside work. She said that she felt strong before the relationship but lost that sense during. "I think that while I was with him, any time I wanted something, I felt selfish. I felt like I shouldn't want to get something or do something for myself." Nancy identified that because she was never given any credit for all the things that she did for the household and relationship, that her worth was never acknowledged. She expressed that she had no voice, and her opinions didn't matter. She questions whether her propensity to dedicate herself fully to relationships is a fault, because she did not like herself then. However, she also conceded that at the time she didn't know any better, "I absolutely believed that. I literally thought that I had no worth, I wasn't contributing, that I wasn't worthy of anything, and that maybe I deserved all this shit." Cecilia ascertained that she learned to expect nothing and did not feel like a priority. She took responsibility for things that were not her fault and recognized that she felt objectified because of a lack of intimacy:

Even sexually everything was about him. I felt objectified. There was no intimacy. There was no passion. There was no kissing or loving. The connection was never there. I was purely an object. That's all I was. And I know that now. I'll do whatever he needs me to do if I'm safe. But little did I know I wasn't safe at all. I hadn't been safe the whole time that we were together. But that was what my ideal is. It was my normal. It was what I was used to.

Several participants expressed that they either lost their confidence or it was ground down even further by the relationship. Claire felt less mature than her partner due to the age gap and played at the role of "girlfriend", pretending to be happy and in a "normal" relationship. She took care of her partner and felt responsible for his feelings, staying silent when she didn't something, to the point that she internalized his misogyny. Valerie allowed her partner to make decisions for her because of lowered confidence and the power differential (age gap/her boss). She stated that she felt "helpless" and "uncertain". "I felt he's a successful person and I wasn't so there might be more truth in his arguments and anything he says. And I had to try to adopt his mentality if I wanted to be successful like him." Eleanor mentioned that she was desperate to hear one good thing about herself from her partner. She dedicated herself to making him happy. Diana discovered that she lost her sense of trust towards others and explained that her self-worth had become nonexistent. Rita described herself like a doormat, she felt that she didn't have the self-respect and self-awareness to do things differently at the time. Mona felt she was so naïve and trusting that she had no sense of self; her partner diminished whatever little that was there. When she met him, she suggested that she had a strong sense of assertiveness, but

that was worn down over time. Tara mentioned that she had gotten addicted to the chaos that her relationship brought for a while. She added that she didn't have any self-confidence during her relationship and had to check with other people for their opinions:

I was just kind of the shadow that was not really all that interesting and he made himself front and centre, and other people made him front and centre. So, I would think, "Well, everybody else likes him. Everybody else thinks he's just incredible. What's wrong with me that I'm struggling in this relationship?", that I must be perceiving things incorrectly or not measuring up in some way.

Half of the participants spoke about feeling like the relationship took away from who they were as people, and that they no longer recognized themselves within it (see 'Lost Self' code for additional detail). Madeline did her best to "tone" herself down for the comfort of her partner and so that he could be the one who shone. She described having her "head in the sand" for so long. Ani described herself as "bold", "brave", and "independent" except when it came to her marriage. She said that no part of herself authentically came into her marriage, and she felt that she deserved the marriage she was in. Sophia began to dislike herself over the years, reflecting what her partner would say. She felt weak because she became completely dependent on her partner and that he was right when he said that she was where she was because of him (her friends, her job, and her status). Dustin noticed that his behaviour changed within the relationship. He became more serious and said that he was low enough to have become an addict. He wanted to run away from it all. Brooke defined herself as a smart person but that her partner had the ability to take all of that away, that he had complete control and made her feel like she

wasn't smart, she was lazy, and not good enough. Elise tried her best to do better, or to be perfect, and when that wasn't good enough, she started to hide the things that were important for her sense of self, but that her partner disapproved of. She did not feel entitled to express when she was feeling depleted. Vanessa stopped trusting herself:

I think I really closed off and shut down. I started to not believe my feelings were valid. Not to trust that my feelings were real. I just started to think of myself as a woman who couldn't get over my pain. So, I just stopped telling anyone anything. I stopped being myself. I started to think that his likes were my likes. I became blended. I didn't know who I was outside him. My life was absorbed by his life.

Mona began to realize that she could not be a part of the relationship without hating herself. Iris found herself avoiding any conflict because it would suck the energy out of her to such a massive degree, however, she disappeared in the process:

I'm definitely a people pleaser. I do tend to be fairly nurturing to my partners, but there's never been another relationship, certainly now or in the past, where I really lost track of me. I felt like myself when I was away. I'd come back, and say, "I'm going to hold onto that." It would be a matter of weeks back with him where I would completely lose that and felt I was acting like a doormat again.

Participants often referred to the effects that their relationships had on their personal wellbeing and their own behaviors. Megan felt a sense of being out of control and at one point during her relationship developed an eating disorder related to pressure her partner was putting on her to look a certain way physically, "I named the eating disorder Bertha because I couldn't come up with an uglier name to represent that part of me." Dawn was

feeling shame because of her relationship and, therefore, became more guarded and protective of herself. Valerie found herself becoming more agitated, moody, and anxious, and her friend pointed out that she was developing mannerisms similar to her INT partner. Sophia also reported becoming angrier and angrier. Ava identified that she couldn't be her carefree self around her partner, "looking back at how I felt when I was around him, I just remember being really sad. I may have not looked it from the exterior, but I just remember a sad feeling." Wendy indicated that what stands out for her most is anxiety that was an undercurrent throughout the whole relationship. She was so focused on her partner that when he wasn't around her anxiety would spike although she felt regularly invalidated by him. She elaborated that she couldn't identify anything that she liked, because in contrast he was so passionate and had all these interests, so in comparison she felt very flat. She no longer had a sense of self.

Shrinking. This is a subcode of 'Self View-During', wherein some of the participants made themselves smaller in some way as a survival technique to avoid notice, conflict, or their partner's anger. In some circumstances, shrinking happened directly because of INT actions. 12 participants reported this sensation.

Robin pointed out that repetitively hearing negative things about yourself wears away at the psyche. Brooke expressed that every single day "you're being beaten down and beaten down". That you can't fully see what is happening at the time. Because you "don't have the capacity when you're in it to recognize or appreciate" what is going on.

Just the feeling that you get so small. I [had] gotten so small. You feel like your wings are clipped, you're punished for the ways that you're unique. The tragedy in this for me is I spent seven years being small, as a waste of life. (Rita)

Megan identified that she began shrinking as a method to avoid admitting to herself and others that she was in an abusive relationship:

I think what scared me that I learned about myself was the fact that I had this... like I could hide. Granted obviously people were noticing. But I could allow somebody to treat me so badly despite knowing that it was so bad.

Several the participants spoke about the need to minimize their own feelings within the relationship as a survival technique, mainly to avoid their partner's anger or disruption to the relationship. Madeline did her best to avoid any conflict by making herself "less visible". Ava felt that she was not able to express herself at all that her feelings were completely suppressed. Vanessa described herself during that period:

Everything I brought up to him was always in my head. So, I was starting to believe that it really was in my head. I just started to keep a really low profile. I look at old pictures of myself with him and I see this hunched woman. I even see my appearance changed. I was rounded, I was awkward. I was standing behind him. And I was ugly. I was really shrouded it almost felt like. It was very much about his friends and his life and his commitments. And it felt very much like I was just in the shadows.

Similarly to others, Nancy stated that she went "quiet" and would "squash" her feelings because if she said something about an issue, she knew that it would be turned around on

her. She wanted to avoid being treated like “garbage”. “Actually, getting them off my chest or talking about them, I knew I would be in for the fight of my life and then, I knew that I would pay for it after.”

Lonely. This is a subcode of ‘Self View- During’ indicating that the participants regularly felt lonely in response to interactions in the Dyad. The INTs sometimes chose deliberately to be away from home or were erratic in their routines of spending time with their partners. In some cases, the dyads had moved away from supports, were having a long-distance relationship, or the INT partner travelled for work. 13 participants reported being lonely within their own relationships even with the INT presence.

Table 9

Circumstances Relating to PNT Loneliness

	Long-distance	INT Travelled for Work	Moved	Total Participants Affected
Number of Participants	6	6	6	13

Note. Some participants appeared in more than one category. Long-distance relationships were only for part of the relationship duration, except for one. Several dyads moved multiple times, and this signifies distance from PNT supports

Madeline said that this was the only time she had ever experienced loneliness in a relationship to that level, and Una was surprised that this could happen even while living with someone. Nancy came to realize that her partner used coming home from work as a reward when she was doing what he wanted or would stay away as a form of punishment. It hadn’t occurred to her previously that he was choosing when to be available:

We definitely had lots of good times and I feel like when the good times were good, they were great. And, the rest of the time, it was filled in with loneliness and not great times. When it was bad, it was bad. His job took him out of town, or rather he chose to go out of town. I realize that now. I think my wording has changed because my understanding has changed. I realize now, those were choices. And the choice was to always not to be around.

Cecilia felt completely abandoned, especially during her pregnancy, and that her partner treated her need as a burden:

Your wife is in the hospital, just almost died, needs your support. I was left to feel completely abandoned. Because it wasn't good for him. It's not what he wanted to do. Those are a couple of things that will die with me. The feeling of disgust.

Megan felt that she couldn't share with anyone what was happening in the relationship which contributed to her loneliness:

This is definitely a hard one, and it is largely under studied. There's largely not enough resources for it. It's a huge stigma, and there's so much blame on the victim and shaming. And it's lonely. If nothing else, it is extremely lonely.

Body Image. This subcode of 'Self View- During' reflects PNT feelings that their body is somehow not good enough. They may have felt pressure by their partner to change their appearance somehow, including weight loss or gain. Some participants also lost weight due to the stress of the relationship. Ten participants reported that their body was a feature in the relationship in some way that was not positive.

Eleanor gained weight from when she was first married and her partner indicated that he felt betrayed, telling her that she was every man's worst nightmare. Megan's partner would compare her to his ex who was a fitness model and would tell her that she wasn't skinny enough, "I was getting fat in his eyes. Except I had a really bad eating disorder and looked like a scarecrow." Robin's partner also promoted body insecurity, stating that she felt overweight while at a healthy weight. In hindsight she realizes that it didn't matter how she looked. Her partner would've treated her the same way anyway.

Conversely, a couple participants felt pressured to gain weight in order to stroke the INT's ego. For instance, Brooke identified that she had lost a "ridiculous" amount of weight due to the stress of the relationship. Her weight loss threatened her partner:

At that stage in my life, not only had I lost 40 pounds. But I looked really good and that bothered him. Because he had gained weight, and he kept saying that I need to put some weight on because I don't look good.

Madeline also described that she was "physically wasting away" because of relationship stress. Morgan's partner had been telling her that she was not pretty, so after her relationship ended she put herself into the social media realm to demonstrate to herself that she could overcome body image issues. She would, "never allow someone to tell [her] that [she] wasn't pretty ever again."

No Voice. This subcode of 'Self View- During' represents how many of the participants felt that they had less of a voice in their relationships the longer time went on. All needs became in service to the INT, and the INT may claim to be the real victim of any contentious situation by mirroring or taking over the PNT's feelings in the

moment. The INT may own all decision making or shift attention or blame. Some of the participants reported that speaking up was no longer worth the fight after a while. 26 participants addressed the sense that they lost their voices in their relationships and were no longer heard.

Ani stated, “there was never a time in my marriage with him or my conversations where I remember being heard and being understood.”

Especially in the beginning of our relationship I attempted to communicate that anxiety, and he would usually shut down. He would not want to continue the conversation. And if we were at my house he would say, “Well, maybe I should go home.” Things like that that made me not want to continue speaking because it felt like my fear of him leaving was worse than the anxiety in that moment. I

would say he was pretty defensive and closed off when I brought it up. (Wendy)

Most of the participants who lost their voices spoke about fear of their partner’s reactions. Kyla mentioned feeling conditioned into not bringing up issues that were bothering her. She said right from the first time she called her partner out in his behavior, he responded with name calling and shirking responsibility. She stopped talking about her feelings to him because she realized he didn’t care. Nancy realized that anything she said would be turned back around on her and it was her partner who would decide when the conversation was over. She “went quiet” as a response and felt alone and silenced. Mia was also unable to discuss certain subjects with her partner, and she found herself staying silent to avoid “blow-outs”. Una’s partner would let her know that he loved to

“debate”, however, she rapidly discovered that meant he would belittle her, and she would feel “constantly undercut” whenever she had a different opinion.

Some of the participants identified that their partner made sure to let them know that they were always wrong. As Cecilia stated:

My whole marriage I just felt like there was this dark cloud hanging over me and I couldn't be myself. I couldn't be free. I couldn't express my views and opinions because if they weren't his, then they didn't count. They were wrong.

She indicated that she learned to “shut [her] mouth” because it wasn't worth the fight she would have to go through. Rita ended up feeling that she was not entitled to her reactions, and that even her gut feelings were challenged by her partner so that they felt not ok or right. She explained that her partner was so verbally skilled, that he would overshadow her voice, “his skill set is verbal. So, I was playing tennis with Serena Williams when I'd talk. By that, I mean, I'm going to lose badly in talking in circles.”

For a few of the participants, such as Una or Jessica, it was implied, or they were explicitly told by their partners that certain topics were off limits. Dawn learned not to call her partner's attention to when his stories did not add up, “so you don't call him out on the inconsistencies when you learn that that gets a negative [reaction], even though you know.” Mona said eventually she became so exhausted by having to push back about her boundaries that she would stop communicating.

The more time went on, the more I felt I didn't have a voice. Often, I felt like I wasn't even allowed to be PMS'ing around him. And when I would bring up an

issue or a feeling, he would twist it so much that I would get confused. Towards the end he actually straight up mocked me in front of the kids. (Ava)

Vanessa would likewise try to resist at first, but felt she lost her voice over time:

I would rear up and get angry. And then I'd be squashed down. That voice was really loud in the beginning, and it got weaker and weaker. I wish I paid attention to it. I'm still struggling to pay attention to it because my default is always to say, "oh, maybe there is something I could have done to be a better person."

Morgan had also felt that her voice had been suppressed and so after the relationship was over, she began to do TV shows and podcasts to prove to herself that her voice matters.

Anger and Frustration. This subcode of 'Self View- During' indicates a change in the PNTs' emotional lability. The PNT may find that their emotional needs are not being met and that they are doing the balance of emotional, relationship, and household labour. As well, (as expressed above), they may not feel heard, understood, or valued, and feel unsafe to express themselves. 14 participants noted that they found themselves growing increasingly angry and frustrated as time went on, becoming irritable more quickly or even adopting partner's less tolerant mannerisms.

Nancy not only found herself getting frustrated but felt that she would get dramatic and animated because she realized that her partner was getting away with things in the sense that there were no consequences for his actions. Ani became angry at the imbalance in her relationship which dissipated once she was no longer in it:

I was carrying all this anger because I was doing it all while I watched him do nothing. Now he's gone and he can do nothing, and I don't have to see it, and I

still have all the same responsibilities that I have, but the relaxed sense of being.

Like I was emotionally absolved of all the anger that I was carrying.

Rita elaborated, “I greatly regret that. Very much so. I was not entitled to my reactions. I can’t step in because I’ll mess it up. So, I became the angry, frustrated, overwhelmed complainer. I would say it was my role.” Valerie was one of the participants who spoke about taking on some of her partner’s behaviors as her own without realizing it, “This is a thing that I didn’t realize about myself. But my friend [said] she felt like I was more agitated, more moody, anxious and that I started adopting my [partner’s] mannerisms and some of his speech patterns.” Anger and frustration increased over the duration. “I went from being pleasing to manipulative, through pleasing to angry, to avoidant, to very, very angry”. (Elise)

In summary, participants found themselves feeling smaller within the relationships, with less self-esteem, and less able to defend themselves against the slights from INTs as time went on. The behavior of their partners, including the imbalance of tasks and lack of concern for their interests sometimes led to feelings and expressions of anger and frustration that was not typical for participants.

Complicating Factors

This main code describes some discrepant data from the interviews contributing to the overall experience for the PNTs. Comorbidities can be common in conjunction with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, including addictions in approximately 24-64% of NPD individuals, depressive disorder in 45-50%, and bipolar disorder in 5-11% (Ronningstam & Weinberg, 2013). While some of the outcomes for PNTs around INT

behaviors relating to the above issues were similar to other codes, the more specific information did not fit with other existing codes.

Addictions. This subcode represents INT misuse of alcohol, drugs, and/or gambling. Five participants identified that partners were dealing with addiction issues.

Kyla, Nancy, and Dorian realized that their partners were misusing alcohol throughout their relationships. Nancy was required to always be the driver due to her partner's addiction and the high likelihood of car accidents. She said that they would have huge fights about him coming home drunk. Ava's partner would come home drunk, or high, or both and sometimes disappear for days on end. She said that he would have to sleep off the high. Eventually he started out going out quite a bit and was often too drunk to care for their children. She would have to spend time searching for his drug stash. Tara's partner struggled with a gambling addiction. She speculated that many gambling addicts may also be narcissists because of the beliefs about their special qualities:

He also had an addiction, which plays into this [dynamic] as well. I'd love to know how many people with a gambling addiction also would be classified as narcissist, because there's a belief that they are above the law, they are above the natural order of things, they have a special quality about them.

Mental Health. This subcode includes mental health issues of the INT which affect the relationship and PNT experience. Seven participants mentioned that the mental health issues of their partner, aside from narcissistic tendencies, were a factor in the relationships.

Dawn, for instance, posited that many people with personality disorders must have overlapping mental illness as well, and she tried to get her partner to see a psychiatrist because she believed that he had undiagnosed ADHD and bipolar disorder. She thought that when he became stressed, he exhibited a pattern that has led to multiple marriages and relationships with the same trajectory. Eleanor's partner was the recipient of multiple diagnoses, including narcissism, and Dorian revealed that his mother-in-law had warned him about his partner's anxiety and depression. Rita's partner also dealt with symptoms of depression and possible ADHD, at one point, ceasing to do any of his usual activities and blaming her for his lack of having friends, outlets, hobbies, and good health. Ava disclosed that her partner was psychologically unsound and struggled with bipolar disorder. During the period of her divorce, she recounted, "I just realized how unstable he was and therefore made me super afraid."

Sexual Issues. This subcode represents certain INT sexual issues that were noted by seven of the participants.

Dawn and Cecilia identified that their partners tried to explain away their cheating behaviors by claiming that they had a sexual addiction. Ani found it strange that she and her partner had not consummated the marriage for some time after the wedding, and when she questioned this, he explained:

He said, "I won't ever fuck you again. You don't fuck a wife. You fuck a hooker. You fuck a girlfriend." And I was like, "What?!" and he was like, "We will only have sex to create children. That is the only time you can expect us to have sex

ever again.” And I was like, “We were having sex two months ago, like lots,” and he went, “No, no. You are my wife now. That is not what wives do.”

Elise was also concerned with elements of control around her partner’s sexual predilections. She stated that their sex life was “weird” from the beginning. She felt that her partner removed himself from any sexual intimacy in an emotional and literal way. She noticed that he was an avid pornography consumer, but “prudish” in actuality, and never initiated sexual activity. Elise eventually ceased initiating and stated that the lack of sex was a nonissue for her partner. She felt that this was his way to completely control intimacy, “and the porn is great because it’s like there’s no humans involved. Or no vulnerability or no need to really connect. It’s just him.”

Corresponding to the power and control motif of most of the above narratives, two participants became aware of sexual assault charges that were levied against their partner. Robin began hearing stories about charges from a previous city, and Ruby’s partner was arrested for sexual assault of a minor and designated a sex offender. Diana was sexually assaulted by her partner on at least one occasion during the relationship.

Couples Therapy

This main code represents one way in which the PNTs attempted to make whole and make sense of their relationships. In all cases, the couples therapy proved to be ineffective for the dyad. Some of the main reasons mentioned by PNTs included their partner’s inability to take responsibility, refusal to continue after one or a few sessions, or that their partner would present a façade to the therapist. Additionally, some participants identified that the traditional couples therapy stance tends to be derived from the concept

of a relationship “dance” wherein both parties have certain responsibilities to the dyad. However, INTs will often use therapy against the PNT, violating the interactive contract. On the other hand, a few of the participants identified some personal benefit to themselves in that they continued in counselling individually, or that the therapist helped them to identify narcissism as a probable factor in the relationship. At least 16 of the dyads attempted couple’s therapy.

Eleanor highlighted why traditional couple therapy was not effective in her situation, saying that there is not a balance in these types of dynamics, and that one person has been traumatized by the relationship:

This is part of the challenge for the person going through this. When you read a marriage book, they all are addressing the continuum of normal. I believe that every therapeutic book needs to have a chapter before it saying, “If these behaviors are in your relationship, you need not to read this book. It will not go well for you.” Because what happens is the narcissistic personality, they mirror you. So, if you say, “I’m hurt.” They say they’re hurt. The immediate assumption is you’re both lying. So, when we did go to therapy, I would explain on her that I’m scared, I can’t breathe and he would say, I’m hurt, I’m scared, I can’t breathe. She’s abusive. Whatever I would say, he would say. So, the person is then forced into a situation where they have to assign 50 percent of the blame to each person. And yet, one person is traumatizing another. One person is innocent. One person is guilty. But nobody will know that and there’s nothing in our lexicon that expresses that. Because our language is, it takes two to tango. The dance of

marriage. One therapist handed us a book, emotion-focused therapy –I could have shot bullet holes through that book. I was so hurt and angry and distraught when I read that book. The entire book is about the dance of marriage. What a dance is not is I want to tango, and you want to kick my legs out from under me, throw me on the ground, stand over me and scream, “You’re not doing it right.” “The problem is that they don’t allow any information in that would interfere with their understanding of themselves.” So, “I’m a great guy. And I’m hard done by and if you have anything else to say, I can’t hear it. You must be wrong.”

We went for marriage counselling. One of the assignments she gave us to do was to give each other a good apology for things that upset the other. I apologized for what he felt I did. And he didn’t apologize to me. When we went back in session the next time, she asked him how come you haven’t given Ava an apology? He literally said because it had been a long time since he took up acting. (Ava)

Dorian identified that the therapy was going nowhere because they just ended up fighting with each other and were not able to address the issues. He felt that he was continually just getting into trouble from his partner. Rita felt that her partner would never follow through on any work that was suggested by the counsellor, and would “conveniently” forget to mention that something she was annoyed by had already happened “12 times” before she really got upset by it, resulting in a discussion about how she could have handled things better:

All these great techniques are not working. We had been to four therapists, and I think I’m a decent human being. Of course, we talk about how my family is

messed up and here I am thinking, “Okay, I know I’m imperfect but I’m owning my stuff. I’m taking responsibility of my stuff.” And I can see how I’m getting better and better. It was just like, “How is none of this working?”

In Sophia’s case, she noticed that her partner used the therapy against her by manipulating the therapist, particularly by “mishearing” details as accolades for himself, and spending his time there presenting as the perfect client:

In therapy, I was an open book. I would just tell her everything. He would still talk highly of me – like, “Oh, [Sophia] does this... and just very simply, I don’t love her anymore. I don’t want to be with her. But, yeah, I can do that. I can do this.” So, just very agreeable, like a good patient or a good client, if you will.

Kyla identified that her partner used a façade in counselling, which they attended for a year and a half before the façade started to really slip:

We ended up seeing her every few weeks for a year and a half. It got to a point where she wanted him to start taking some accountability for where things went wrong. Because his position in the relationship was that he had no idea there was anything wrong. He had no idea I was unhappy, and then all of a sudden one day I up and left and changed his whole world. And he’s still trying to recover. And she said, “You need to start taking accountability. You cannot blame the demise of the relationship on her all the time.” At that point he said, “I don’t like her. I don’t think we’re getting anywhere with her. And I’m not going anymore.” She told me that it wasn’t until near the end that she started seeing the real him. That he was

really manipulative. He had been controlling this thing. He comes in and acts like a really great guy. In reality, he's holding the puppet strings more than he lets on. Kyla and Rita both state that their partners refused to take any accountability in therapy which made it impossible to progress. Rita's therapist suggested individual sessions for her partner, and asked him to pick two ideas to work on from a list:

Wanna guess which two he picked of the dozens offered in a list by the therapist?...Wait for it..."I've done nothing wrong" and "it's not my fault". I was gobsmacked, and said, er...Dan, those beliefs and excuses are exactly why we're struggling and in therapy, and you want to STRENGTHEN them!!? He just shrugged and said, "I know, but that's what I wanted and that's what I picked".

In both Rita and Ava's case, their INT partners blamed them for a lack of progress. Dustin's partner not only blamed their therapist for some of the issues that they were having but also made up a story to explain to family about why she did not have to take accountability, "She's like, "There's nothing wrong with me." She came back. She spoke to my parents. She's like, 'The counsellor wants to have an affair with [Dustin] and she's bringing out these things in me.'"

Eight of the participants reported that their INT partners continually rejected counsellors, especially once their problematic behavior was identified, or else refused to attend anymore. Perhaps not by coincidence, seven of these were dyads wherein the counsellors had identified narcissism, Una saying:

I think it was also having that third therapist say, “This isn’t a healthy relationship.” I think it finally started to sink in that there was a possibility of something different at some point. That took a long time to actually fully believe.

Mia and her partner were dropped from therapy due to her partner’s narcissistic traits:

There were a couple of group therapy sessions where the therapist basically fired us. Seeing that happen is really interesting because I don’t think I was the problem, and just seeing a professional look at us and be like, “Holy shit. There’s no hope,” I think that was kind of the initial sort of glimpse that I had into how not right things were with him. Fired us from group therapy and then kicked him out of the room and sat there with me and said, “You know, this is what you’re up against. Look up these terms. Do your research,”

In a few cases, PNTs continued with individual therapy after their partners’ refusals.

Resistance

Along the way in each of the relationships there were multiple examples of resistance to the psychological abuse and manipulation that existed reflected in many of the codes, however, this code gathers some of the most emphasized examples of push-back. These include moments of challenging INT behaviors and words, use of humor, striving for increased independence, researching to make sense of cognitive dissonance or events of the relationship, or to prove that they were not wrong all of the time after all.

Kyla, for example, realized that she couldn’t follow her partners plan of a traditional family structure because she would become more enmeshed into the relationship. Having experienced home insecurity in her childhood she felt that she could

not let that happen to her child. She was able to sell the idea of getting a job to her partner by telling him about all the benefits to him (including that his high stresses would be lessened). Valerie held firm with her partner against constant attempt to shift her boundaries when she was not willing to engage in a relationship that was polygamous. Ani felt that there were two sides to herself, herself as a wife versus her career life. She speculates that she separated those to protect herself, and in one instance that helped to push back on the idea of having another baby. She was also able to grasp on to a sense that what her partner was telling her about herself was not the accurate depiction:

I think there was a part of me that knew that none of that was true. There was a very clear part of me that was holding on to “You are not this version that he’s trying to present you to be. You have worth.” I knew. There was a strong part of me. That was there. Then I really truly believe that this wife hat was like, “No, no, no. I am not worth it, I am not this...” I feel like I separated myself into two versions for much of that entire relationship I would say. There was that version of me, and then there was the other version of me, and they were battling.

During one crisis moment in their relationship, Ava decided that instead of being more reactive she became more observant about how she was treated and what her partner’s responses were. This allowed more clarity about her partner’s personality and beliefs. Tara stated that she recognized at some point she had to get an education to be able to support herself, and she feels forever grateful to herself for having the awareness to do that. She also got her own checking account which her partner was appalled by. Her partner was also opposed to her attending the gambler’s anonymous support group. She

received mockery from him for going, however she met many women who were in similar positions and could partially understand what she was experiencing.

I always thought that he was trying to get a rise out of me, but then he couldn't.

Then he would be more mad, and it escalated because he couldn't get a rise out of me. I was just very much like, "I'm not reacting to this shit." I'm reacting on the inside, but I'm very good at not expressing it. (Madeline)

She also did not allow him to return to the relationship the way he wanted on his terms. Sophia's partner continues to indicate that he would like to get back together, however now that she has become aware of his lying, she states that this, "falls on deaf ears".

Many of the participants would point out their partners' inconsistencies and poor conduct along the way, even knowing that they would face backlash for doing so.

Madeleine would continue to turn her partner's behaviour back to him when he would attempt to offload responsibility. When Vanessa's partner would make fun of her in public, she began to call him out on it. Rita would regularly remind herself to challenge her partner, "I would always think, "Ask him. Press him on that. Follow it up. Point out the inconsistencies". During the process of separation, Dawn realized that she had "suppressed" so many of her partner's "lies and stories" for so long that once they were with legal counsel, she would not allow him to put out falsehood without challenge.

Some of the participants indicated that they eventually realized that they were no longer willing to take all the blame for problems. Madeleine resisted the idea that she was the source of all of her partner's unhappiness, so she began to create subtle inside jokes for herself to identify her partner's negative behaviour and to see her through the

moment. Tara recognized that at times she was able to tap into resistance and say to herself, “no this is not you”, saying, “I mean sometimes it was just so glaring that it wasn’t me. I mean how could I possibly have been responsible for that?”

A few pointed out how determined they were towards the end to hold on to their sense of worth. In Madeleine’s case she felt it was a source of pride for her to “break” the marriage when she finally showed her intelligence to her partner. Kyla was able to establish resistance to her partner’s threats to take their son away at the end of the relationship because she felt strong in knowing her worth as a parent. She also found that goal proving the INT wrong about her was a motivator for her to do well in life.

Some reflected that there was a point in which they made determined efforts to step away from trust or the focus on their partner. For example, at one point Mia decided to listen to her instincts and to get real proof that her partner was indeed cheating. Elise decided to continue her club membership despite her partner making regular and negative comments about her attendance:

It was the first place I’d made real friends. It was mine. I had a place to go that were my people. I sensed there was something off about him wanting to get rid of it and making this big a deal about it.

When Tara’s partner would actively overshadow her in social events and was putting on a façade with others, Tara started taking the car keys and going home because of what she described as complete a disconnect with her and partner.

Participants started to ask for more from their partners and the relationships. Elise and Dustin expressed that they needed more accountability from their partners, and

Dustin recognized that if she wasn't willing to give that, that they would be headed for divorce. Eleanor began noticing and pushing back against the imbalance. She stated that her "intellectual-self" prevented her from totally self-damaging over the dysfunction and she would try to push back with facts. She expressed to her partner that every time she felt angry or hurt by him somehow, she ended up apologizing to him but that he never apologized to her. She ended up giving him an ultimatum that they go to counselling to try to make things better. Morgan let her partner know that if he continued his behaviour, that she was going to run away from the relationship.

Participants resisted even in the face of highly negative consequences. Most PNTs reported substantial increases in difficulties once they started asserting themselves. Robin found that when she began to uphold her own expectations and wanting to better herself, that there was backlash, "He didn't like that, so it was instantly fighting over everything."

If I ever were to confront him, "I'm not comfortable with this. You're not treating me fair on this." Or whatever it was. Then he would react, and he would gaslight me. Everything was my fault, I'm delusional and I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm making things up, and I'm trying to make him feel bad. (Megan)

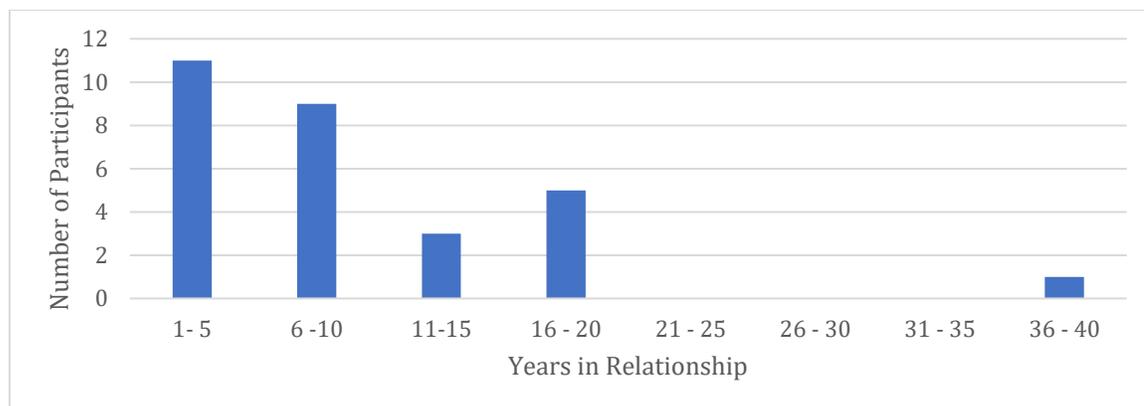
Whenever Nancy wanted to talk about an issue, she knew that she was entering the "danger zone". She acknowledged that she would still bring some things up even if she knew she was going to be treated like "garbage".

These acts of resistance and of independence often represented the unravelling of the relationships. For instance, Cecelia discovered proof of yet another instance of her partner cheating and said to him, "end it with her and then we'll go to counselling and

figure it out.” But she wouldn’t commit to him. She said she knew “damn well” that he wouldn’t go to counselling and that he wasn’t going to end things with the affair partner. Brooke pointed out that it does not go well to call a narcissist’s bluff, but that at the end she was willing to do that because she had gotten stronger. Leaving her partner felt like the hardest thing she had ever done, and Jessica knew that if she didn’t close all doors back that her “life would be horrific right now”. Diana likewise decided to block her partner’s contact information so that she could preserve herself. Elise mentioned that her partner was holding her son’s wellbeing over her head so that she wouldn’t leave, but she came to her final point, “I kind of was, like, “You know what, I don’t care if I live under [a] Bridge. Yeah, that’s not going to work on me this time.” “Is that a threat? Because if it’s a threat I’m leaving.” She let him know that a divorce could happen healthfully.

Longevity

This main code represents the attributions participants made as to why they felt their relationship lasted as long as it did. Barriers to leaving and reasons for staying were nuanced and woven throughout the narratives in multitudes of ways, however, this code highlights some of the emphasized factors and is broken down further into the following subcodes. (Main subcodes include PNT Mental State, PNT Family of Origin, PNT Personality, Codependence, Relationship Beliefs, Binding, Isolation, and INT Personality.) Figure 5 is a demonstration of the number of participants by range of time spent in the relationship (See Figure 1 in Demographics for a more detailed breakdown).

Figure 5*Number of Years Spent in Relationship*

Claire identified that if she had had more confidence in herself that the relationship likely wouldn't have lasted long, "I think this should have been like a six-month long relationship, but it wasn't. I think the things that kept me there, it would be... I wasn't confident enough in following my instinct". Wendy disclosed a sense of discombobulated confusion in not knowing exactly what was going on, saying "it was hard to put my finger on what happened". Rita wonders if she would've gotten out sooner had she been healthier going into the relationship. Madeline offered a unique perspective, wondering if absencing herself from becoming involved in the patterns of conflict escalation may have actually decreased the longevity of the relationship, since her partner seemed to desire the intensity. Robin spoke about being ground down by her partner:

Even when you tell your story, people focus on his actions and they're like "Wow, he's such a bad person. How did you stay with such a bad person?", but they don't focus on "What was that like for you to hear for four years that you

were a bad person and that nobody liked you and that his family hated you and that you, basically, should be thankful that he's even giving you the time of day?"

Mental State. This subcode of 'Longevity' examines the more serious thoughts and feelings of participants that may have promoted retaining the relationship or prevented leaving. This subcode is broken down into seven additional subcodes.

Morgan detailed how physically unhealthy she had become due to the extreme state of anxiety that she was under being part of her relationship. She said that towards the end of the relationship she was pulling her car over to throw up just water and the surgeons that she was seeing said that there was nothing that they could do to help her. She added that two months after the breakup she was fine to the point that she could even drink alcohol with no ill effect. Two of the participants noted that their undiagnosed ADHD may have made them more vulnerable the relationship. Madeline suggested that this had hindered her progress and contributed to her overall feelings about herself. Elise said her diagnosis and treatment led her to the realization that she was not to blame for everything after all. She did point out however that people with ADHD are more vulnerable to narcissists because of an inherent mistrust of their own instincts. Brooke was frightened by the idea that she had contemplated killing herself, "Suicide even crossed my mind back then. He had that much control. It's pretty scary to think of that."

Shortened Focus. This subcode of 'Mental State' indicates that a large portion of PNT energy was directed towards making sure their partner was happy and caretaking their partner's moods and whims, meaning that it was very difficult to see the wider picture of the relationship. This may mean that the participants were suppressing their

instincts through denial or avoidance and distracting themselves with other things. 20 participants reported a sense of a shortened focus.

Wendy and Una suggested that part of the issue was that there wasn't a lot of space and distance. Because of the short-term focus, they couldn't see the macro picture:

In some ways I wish the relationship could have been shorter. But I understand why it lasted longer, it wasn't easy to just be, like, "oh no, what has happened?" I think another quality about the relationship is that there were so many issues that came up. But I almost had a short-term memory for them because they happened and then they weren't resolved. In a way that kept me from seeing the whole bigger picture, like I only had this very short focus. (Wendy)

I couldn't picture a life beyond this. And what I would do or who I would be without him. I do think that that cycle was part of it too, the push and pull. And there is nothing like the relief of that moment when, it's like "Okay, we're back together." And it makes it so hard to see beyond that moment. And so, I think that short-term focus – I wonder sometimes if I looked earlier on, really taken a long-term focus whether I would have stayed as long. But I was always just looking for, "Okay, can I get him to stay for next week, for the next two weeks?" So, there was always that short-term focus on, "Can we survive for this long?" Rather than, "what are we looking at in the future?" (Una)

Madeline expressed that her partner actively narrowed her view of the future:

I feel like when I was with my ex, my possibilities were eliminated. Not like, "Oh, I cannot move away because his job," or not even big decisions like that. It

was like, “I feel like I can’t leave the house without bringing my phone,” because he would get mad at me because, “Everybody brings their phone. What’s wrong with you?” Then he can’t phone me and find out where I am.

Ava wanted so much to see the positive, that she missed many of the negatives:

I think I was in a lot of denial about our relationship being so rough because I’ve always been the kind of person that thinks of my cup as half full. I always like to count my blessings because I know whatever situation I’m in, there are way more good things than bad things. I think I focused on that so much that I lost sight of just how bad it was.

Nancy suggested that it wasn’t until the relationship was over that she was able to remove her blinders, “My blindfold moved out. And I was finally able to start to crack open my eyelids, just a little bit”. Dawn stated that it was hard to have objectivity in the middle of things, “Even after, seeing all the lies and all the continuing abuse and whatever, you can’t put that into perspective until you have some distance. In the middle of it, you don’t realize how bad it is until you’re out.” Tara pointed out how difficult it was to get her “perception straight” when there would always be the kind of feedback about how incredible her partner was.

Some of the participants identified that they would actively avoid thinking about the state of their relationships or use distractions to redirect themselves. Jessica ceased to ask questions of others so that she wouldn’t reflect about her relationship, suppressing her instincts all the while. Mia didn’t have the mental capacity to remove herself from the relationship, so she used avoidance. Iris echoed a similar sentiment, “the whole argument

and conflict, it sucks the energy out of you. And I would rather just again, avoid it or just give in so you don't have to deal with it." Cecelia said that she was so afraid of the truth, and she didn't want to believe it, so it was easier to look away despite her friends' input. Elise stated that she "kept the circus going" to avoid looking at the relationship and kept focus on her son. "Raising him was very distracting." Vanessa said, "I didn't want to face the pain I would feel when I was by myself. I was always trying to keep myself busy, I always had something to do to just distract me from what was really going on."

Numb. This subcode of 'Mental State' represents participants' sense of being out of touch with their own feelings. In some cases, they indicated that it was safer to feel nothing at all. Five participants spoke about this sensation.

Mona came to a realization, based on her partner's reaction to her when she tried to reach out, that there was nothing that she could do. She said it made her feel like she shouldn't bother trying and that bred apathy in her. Megan described that she didn't feel entitled to her own emotional state, that she had become increasingly numb:

Even though I was really numb to all of that, I said, yeah, that sounds good. I'll go and I'll keep working [in their business without being paid]. [Counsellors] made me fill out the Beck's inventory for depression and anxiety. And I think all the things were true that I filled out, but I always felt like I was exaggerating my emotions. I can't possibly be that sad. I can't possibly be that miserable. So, I think the answers were true, but I felt like I wasn't allowed to feel that way.

Exhausted. This subcode of 'Mental State' encapsulates the participants' feeling of being drained too much to stand up for themselves or to continue to try to make

changes in the relationship. Some participants indicated that they had no energy to do anything but survive after a certain point. 12 participants reported exhaustion relating to their partner or events of the relationship, preventing them from living their full lives or making certain decisions.

Eleanor felt that she was exhausted from dealing with all of her partner's narcissistic traits and his "vampire energy". She elaborated that the emotional abuse was crushing her and sucking her energy dry. "Drama, lying, exhaustion. Just mental gymnastics and beating your head against a wall. Then over time, you just get so exhausted with it. It's just like I would stop communicating." (Mona) Dustin asserted that his partner would often express the most needs when he was exhausted. He said he could not respect himself and could no longer continue the way that he had:

The first marriage counsellor we were going to, I would tell her that this relationship just makes me feel like exhausted all the time. She said, "It's okay. You're putting a coin in the piggy bank or something." And I was like, "The piggy bank has exploded."

He stated that he had "no room left to heal" in the relationship. Elise pinpointed that her exhaustion came from trying to be "better and better and better" at her partner's behest, also saying, "having to be in the presence of this individual so much and be manipulative [to survive it] all the time was really depleting."

For some participants the exhaustion was generated from a lack of participation in the heavy lifting of the relationship. Brooke made it clear that she was so enmeshed and exhausted towards the latter part of her relationship that she couldn't recognize or believe

what was happening. Cecelia was taking care of their child, the home, and working and her partner was still mad about not being put central. She discussed that she let many things go because it just wasn't worth the fight, that she didn't have it in her:

During the marriage every time [partner] did something wrong or said something wrong or became selfish, which happened a lot, I remember thinking, "Is it worth the fight?" And I would sometimes just not even bother because I just didn't have it in me to know that I was going to lose the battle. Regardless of whether he was wrong or not, I would have lost because there's no way a narcissist is going to be wrong about anything. They're the victim. And I just didn't realize he was a narcissist back then. So, I just thought he was volatile.

No Room to Breathe. This is a subcode of 'Mental State' representing an environment of having no space to process feelings, make sense of events, or to contemplate life outside of the relationship. 11 of the participants addressed metaphorical or actual inability to breathe properly whilst in the relationship.

"I feel like, literally, I cannot breathe when I'm around you." (Madeline) Eleanor came to a difficult realization that being around her partner was the factor associated with her breathing issues:

I could never catch my breath and I knew it was psychosomatic because when I would sleep, I would breathe fine. I'd wake up in the morning and I wouldn't be able to breathe. Like somebody was smothering me all the time. It was an awful feeling. I was getting autoimmune issues, I had this breathing issue, and then, when he went away, my breathing issue stopped. When the narcissist is in your

house, he or she affects the entire mood and tone and your ability to breathe.

Because when somebody hates you or is enraged with you or is disgusted by you, so then that affects your quality of life, and you can't get away from it.

Brooke and Dustin explained they didn't have space to react, process, or take a breath.

Dawn discussed the necessity of getting space so she could breathe and have perspective:

When you're in the middle of it, you don't necessarily see all the options and what you're really dealing with. It's not until you step back and take a breath.

Even after, seeing all the lies and seeing all the continuing abuse and whatever, you can't put that into perspective until you have some distance. So, in the middle of it, you don't realize how bad it is until you're out.

Ani's partner moved away temporarily which allowed her to come to some realizations, "I think the only reason that that side of me won is because he moved. I still don't know if he hadn't left, if he hadn't given me room to breathe, I think I'd still be choking."

Self-Esteem. This is a subcode of 'Mental State' and explains how PNT self-esteem was degraded by their partners. Self-esteem may have been high in the beginning or high in other areas, presenting a contrast. This code became relevant to at least 12 participant narratives because of an inability to see their own value or worth.

Robin highlighted that part of the reason she stayed in the relationship was that her self-esteem had been so ground down. She said that there was a sense of dependence and a fear of losing everything. Some described it like a feeling of being completely unworthy. Ani and Diana said they felt they "deserved" the relationship they were in.

When you think it's you, and you don't think it's them, you're just thankful they stay, and that's why I think I took it so hard when he used to make little threatening gestures like pull up places to rent, because I was like "Wow, I'm really so awful that he doesn't want to be with me anymore." That's what would go through my mind, and he knew that. He was smart enough and resourceful enough to know. (Robin)

Some of the other participants felt a subtle sense that their partners were better than them somehow. Wendy pointed out that there was an imbalance of self-worth and idealization:

I think looking back now I learned that a lot of it was about self-worth and that I felt in a way that he was better than me. I've been working on that and trying to improve that sense of self so that I wouldn't get into a situation again.

A few participants linked self-esteem to the existing vulnerability that they in partnering with somebody with narcissistic traits. Robin, for example, suggested this created more insecure bonds and that she would hold on more tightly over time. Morgan connected childhood abuse to overcompensating for low self-worth in relationships. Tara felt she was primed for the relationship because she thought so lowly of herself at the time.

In contrast, other participants specified that they started off with high self-esteem: I felt like my self-esteem was better before I started my relationship with my ex-husband. My self-esteem definitely deteriorated throughout the course of our relationship. R: How about now? P: I feel good. I really felt a burst of empowerment when I started going to individual counselling and reading all these books, about boundaries, about co-dependency. (Ava)

Negative Self-Talk. This is a subcode of ‘Self-Esteem’ wherein some of the participants reinforced messaging from their partners by “beating” themselves up mentally during the relationship. Six PNTs reported engaging in negative self-talk.

Diana speculated that because she was already at lower point of self-worth, she kept telling herself that this was the love that she deserved. Vanessa considered herself to be a perfectionist and said that she spent a lot of time “catching myself in negatives”. She would regularly question herself, wondering, “maybe I’m being too selfish, maybe I am not being attentive enough”:

I was always feeling terrible, always feeling guilty and like I could do better. And I’d beat myself up terribly when I couldn’t be nicer or I’d lose my cool or... so I remember just feeling like, even when he left, like I’d let him down. How could I have ever thought about leaving him? I beat myself up and just kept going. I just thought it was my fault. That’s why I stayed. I honestly believe I’d probably still be there had he not made that decision. I think he probably did us both a favour.

Nancy eventually realized that it was her partner’s voice that was echoing in her head when she reverted to telling herself that she would never be able to leave:

I didn’t have those escape plan thoughts frequently. They were there quietly in the back of my head when things were awful. I very quickly reminded myself, “You’ll never be able to do it. How am I going to be able to afford this?” It would be his voice essentially telling me “You’re not good enough. You can’t figure these things out. You need me.” But all along, the irony is, I was doing all the things. Literally all the things.

Fear of Loneliness. This is a subcode of ‘Mental State’ indicating that a barrier for eight PNTs for leaving was fear of the loneliness that might be felt outside of the relationship because the INT had become so central to everything.

For example, Cecelia and Nancy stated that they were terrified to be on their own and of the unknown.

I think there was that scared girl, that girl who’s scared of being alone, who’s scared of not being able to find anyone else, who was scared of not being enough for anyone else, who felt that she deserves the marriage that she was in, that she wasn’t working hard enough. (Ani)

A few of the participants expressed concern about their age and never finding someone else as a barrier to leaving. Rita said that she didn’t want to, “become a single, divorced, miserable, messed up, lonely, bitter woman in my forties”. As well Vanessa said that she couldn’t see beyond the relationship or what she would do without her partner. She elaborated that she favored of having a relationship at all costs, “I think part of it was a belief that, “I’m in my thirties. Am I going to find someone else? He seems so great. And he seems so wonderful. He’s interested in me. So, I’ll just persevere.”

PNT Family of Origin (FOO). In some of the dyads, the participants’ FOO was a factor in the persistence of the relationship. Certain familial conditions may have made participants more vulnerable to accepting INT behaviors. Some examples included parentifying the PNTs as a child (ex: a mentally ill parent who demanded caretaking), as well as specific narcissistic behaviors exhibited by one or both parents. 20 participants reported that their family of origin may have been an element in longevity.

Some participant families were encouraging of the relationship, which gave more weight to the decision of staying or leaving. Dustin's parents modelled an arranged marriage, and he was given the message that you work through differences. Cecilia mentioned that her mom was "old school" and that she was told to just "ignore it". Morgan expressed that she had "difficult" family dynamics growing up and that her parents "fought so much but pretended everything was fine". She felt that her mother prevented her from acting on negatives that she saw in the relationship:

My family was pushing too because my mother controlled a lot of what I did at the time and my mother really liked him. That probably contributed to how I ended up there. In hindsight, I feel if my mother wasn't as involved in my life, I would have caught on to the red flags sooner.

Eleanor recounted that she learned the lesson to be "good and quiet" for her FOO. In Kyla's case she took on a parental role:

My own family was really dysfunctional. My mum wasn't the person to bring people together or host things. It was always me from a really young age. I think at 18 I was making the Thanksgiving dinner, inviting everybody to my house. So, I think that that kind of lent itself into the dynamic of our relationship where I was in this position where I could be taken advantage of and taken for granted.

Wendy's mother struggled with alcoholism which she said stressed her out due to worry.

Claire learned to prioritize her mother's wellness as well:

I think a lot of my experiences with my mom, because I grew up with a single mom essentially. What wellness meant was me being the good girl. Me being

somewhat quiet. Being reserved. Being dependent on her for her to speak for me because I was shy. And prioritizing her wellness, like her mental health. I think that put the role of... I think that's why I also stayed with him for so long because if I prioritize him and I am the good kind of quiet girl, then things will be peaceful. Things will be happy.

Some narcissistic traits were apparent in participant's FOO. Madeleine speculated that she might have been more comfortable with her partner's patterns because of her father's modelling of certain behaviours growing up. Nancy elaborated:

I definitely see some similarities in my parents' relationship and their behavior together to what I experienced. I guess one could say I didn't know any better because it was similar, familiar. Not that I didn't know any better, it was like, "Okay, yeah this is normal." So there weren't a lot of things that I questioned.

Ani also felt that she was left vulnerable because of her parents' interactions:

I don't think I learned good things about what a marriage is from my parents, I think they inadvertently taught me that you stay in bad things. They fought throughout their entire... They had their 40th wedding anniversary and the theme was "Loving loudly." And I remember looking at my mum and going, "Screaming at your partner every day is not love, mum." I don't think I knew what relationships were supposed to be, and I think that I thought that the fact that I was in a marriage with someone who yelled and screamed at me, didn't meet my needs, was totally normal. No one around me was saying, "This isn't right." I had a family history where it was somewhat normalized. Yelling at your partner

and screaming and calling names and saying, “You aren’t...” was all normalized in my experience. So, in a way I think I was a bit of a sitting duck sometimes.

Tara said that she grew up in an “anxious” home and her mother was likely a narcissist:

I learned why I was ripe for this kind of relationship. My mother was a different kind of narcissist. She demanded all the attention through illness real or imagined. So, it was a perfect match really in that regard for being somebody else’s whipping boy in a sense. I was even told that some of her illness was related to my behaviour. I was a really good kid but came from a very anxious sort of home and just wanting to be a normal kid and go out with your friends when you’re a teenager and stuff was considered really rebellious and making her sick.

Some participants grew up in physically abusive households. Ava elaborated that her father also demonstrated narcissistic traits, that she was unable to learn healthy boundaries in that setting, and dysfunctional behavior was normalized:

I grew up with really strict parents, especially extremely strict military dad. And he was never nice to me and a little bit physically abusive. I remember when I was three, he hit me with a belt because I peed my pants. And when I was older, he would pull my ears really hard. They would crack and bleed, and he would call me names. Also growing up, ever since I was a little girl, I remember all the adults telling me, “Oh, he doesn’t think you’re his daughter”. And later in my adulthood I found out that was because he cheated on my mum with her best friend. So probably to make himself feel better he denied the fact that I was his daughter, which is weird because we look so much alike. I think a part of me felt

that kind of treatment from a man was normal. Maybe part of me also felt, “oh, he doesn’t physically hurt me. So, I have a good one.” Maybe that’s how I felt.

In contrast, several participants, grew up in healthy and loving family homes. Jessica, for example, was very much wanting to follow her mom’s model, being very invested in family.

Attachment. This is a subcode of ‘PNT FOO’ and represents the emotional attachment trauma that seven PNTs indicated was a factor later in life in relationships.

For example, Ani classified herself as an “anxious-attacher”. It was through the experience of her relationship that Claire began to learn about her “sensitivities and attachment trauma created by her family of origin”. Cecilia was adopted and speculated that might have something to do with attachment trauma:

I think that even though I was adopted from my two-weeks old, so I didn’t know any different, I was chosen, right? So, I never really felt that I had any feeling of abandonment because I always knew about it, and I knew why I was adopted. Maybe subconsciously that may play a little part of feeling– just that fear of abandonment through life. So, I was hanging on to whatever relationship, even though it was toxic because it’s all I had.

Eleanor surmised that she had learned to sacrifice her own needs in favor of keeping attachments in her life as a child:

Gabor Maté talks about two really powerful drives. One is attachment, and one is authenticity. When you live as a child in a house that you have to give up your authenticity in order to keep the attachment, so whether that’s if you have to get

good grades, you have to achieve, you have to be a good girl, you have to not have any needs, you have to be quiet when mommy comes home or daddy comes home, or because when you learn these lessons, you learn that “Okay, I need to not listen to that voice that says I’m sad, I’m lonely, I’m scared. I need to behave in a way that’s separate from how I feel.” And so, when your brain wires that way, you take that into adulthood.

Morgan felt that she was missing affection from her FOO and aside from the negative behaviors in her relationship, her partner was willing to provide that to her:

I still say he was better than my parents in some way just because he was very affectionate. That was almost like my first experience of anyone ever loving me.

I’m missing that love because that was something that I really would have craved.

And that’s what I was attached to for a very long period of time.

Megan also indicated attachment trauma, however suggested that it was a product of her relationship rather than her FOO, “I think I have a serious fear of abandonment or rejection. That comes from that relationship. So, I do notice that, and it’s something that I’m actively still working on.

Culture. This is a subcode of ‘PNT Family of Origin’ and specifies the cultural elements around marriage and partnership which may have encouraged longevity, such as valuing financial stability over emotional wellbeing, or lack of acknowledgement about mental health concerns, for example. Eight participants referred to cultural elements relating to the duration of their relationships.

Valerie relayed that in her Asian culture she was expected to be quiet, compliant, nice, and pleasant. Dustin was expected to make his arranged marriage work through differences. Morgan expressed that she came from traditional background with the expectation that she wouldn't date for fun, and because of her rapid marriage she felt that this gave her partner cultural permission to do "whatever" at that point. Ava was from a strict Eastern European culture, in which she was not allowed to express herself:

Growing up with very strict parents... I guess it's also an Eastern European thing. We were never, ever allowed to talk back. If we talked back, we would get smacked. I never really felt like I was even allowed to have an opinion.

Dorian spoke about the cultural beliefs about North American males and how difficult it was to open up about feelings, calling the expectations "macho bullshit", meaning that support and understanding was more limited.

PNT Personality. This subcode of 'Longevity' represents the PNT personality factors of 12 participants which may have promoted a longer duration of the dyads.

Some participants implied that they had a tendency to undervalue themselves. For instance, Kyla felt that she couldn't do better than her partner. Valerie pointed out that she was the only employee who didn't leave her boss/partner's employ. Nancy suggested that she was kind of "quiet, unseen, and not important" and was given attention by her partner that she had not received from anyone else.

Some participants spoke about generally assuming good intentions. "I always want to believe the best about a person. That's what I think got me into this whole thing

in the first place and what I tell myself is, I want to choose to believe the best.” (Ruby)
 Elise said that for her to move forward, she couldn’t look at her partner as the “bad-guy”.

Many of the participants referred to the absence or flexibility of their own boundaries, sometimes only, in romantic relationships.

I think another part of the length of the relationship was I kept telling myself, “Maybe it’ll change”. That was common, feeling like it will change. I think I hadn’t really been taught how to keep a barrier between myself and other people in a romantic sense. I think with other people I had barriers. (Elise)

In some cases, the flexibility of boundaries was linked to the importance of others’ perspectives of the participants. Una suggested that she is a people pleaser, which was reinforced in her relationship by her partner. Importantly, she felt that her positive qualities were taken advantage of by her INT partner. Mona clarified why she thought she put up with her partner’s behavior:

It really wasn’t hope. It really wasn’t fear. I think I have issues around being viewed as the bad person. I hated the idea of his family seeing me as a bad person, even though they’re not really that wonderful, I shouldn’t really care that much what they think of me. But I’ve always been like that, even as a little kid. I always am really concerned about other people’s perspective of me.

Caretaker. This is a subcode of ‘PNT Personality’ and suggests that one aspect of participants’ personality was a sense that they needed to caretake their partner’s emotional and physical state, at times sacrificing too much of their own wellbeing. Many of the participants indicated that this was a trait not just limited to their partners, but that

they saw themselves as a helper, and would generally take on emotional responsibility for others. Please refer to the full explanation of the ‘Caretaker’ subcode in ‘Self View-Original’ as this code appeared in two places of the participant narratives.

Agreeable. This subcode also appears in the ‘PNT Personality’ and ‘Self View-Original’ codes. Please refer to ‘Self View- Original’ for more information.

Empathy. This is a subcode of ‘PNT Personality’ indicating at least 12 participants made note of efforts to connect with their partner’s perspective during disagreements and being taken advantage as a result. This allowed the INT to play the victim of the situation, creating confusion for participants and increased longevity.

Eleanor pointed out that empathy in a relationship is a positive thing but that she would give empathy to the expense of her own well-being because her partner played on that sensibility. She felt this trait drove her to try harder and harder in her relationship, to respond with attempts for understanding, and checking of herself. She expressed that “usually empathy and compassion are wonderful gifts and they’re usually bonding and create a connection”, however, they can be twisted in the PNT-INT dyad. Rita found that when she would come to her partner about a concern where she felt that she was the injured party, her partner would refuse responsibility and appeal to her empathy by saying, “where’s the compassion?”. Claire suggested that her partner knew how to strategically use her sense of empathy to get what he wanted or to twist the truth, “So good at knowing where my soft spots were. Oh, let’s tap into her empathy.”

Many of the participants spoke about how their sense of empathy contributed to the unhealthy dynamic in the relationship. Robin, for example, felt that was the reason

for her more flexible boundaries. Dustin found he was taking on the load of consoling and emotional caretaking without reciprocation. Dorian stated that he felt a great deal of empathy for his partner and her family situation, which contributed to staying in the relationship. He pointed out that “empaths” often attract narcissists because there is an ability to shift focus and to take advantage. In reflection, Madeline still feels empathy for her partner and pities that he operates the way he does.

Codependence. This is a subcode of ‘Longevity’ and represents a sense of reliance on the relationship that may relate to INT control and psychological abuse, such as with finances, promises, putdowns etc. This was often mentioned in conjunction with lowered self-esteem and the questioning of the self. The phenomenon may have allowed the INT to keep participants close while still behaving badly. 15 participants mentioned elements of co-dependence within their relationships.

Robin said that her INT partner would tighten her dependence through pointing out perceived flaws and then indicating that she needed him because only he could accept her. This is a form of trauma bonding in which people stay in the PNT INT relationship because their self-esteem has been greatly diminished. There is a sense of dependence, and a fear of losing everything. Kyla indicated that she felt strong before her relationship but lost that during. She said she felt more dependent, and that dependence grew subtly and over time. Eleanor said it felt like, “your needs are his needs. His needs are your needs. Like I didn’t need anything.” Vanessa mentioned that she and her partner became blended, and that she didn’t know who she was outside of him. She felt that her life was absorbed by his life. Una felt that she was validating her worth through her partner:

We had a number of breakups throughout that time that we were together. It was that pattern of absolute relief when it was like, “Okay, we’re back together.” So, feeling like I was validating my own worth through him. If he thought I was okay, then I was okay. If he didn’t, then I wasn’t. I don’t know who I am right now. I am so entrenched in this relationship and being a part of his life, that I had such a hard time standing on my own in those moments.

A few of the participants specified that they became codependent through doing so much:

This is the codependent part of it, where I really learned that phrase, “I can help you.” I can show you that life is not all garbage. If you’re down, I’m going to get you back up. If you’re feeling anxious, I’m going to take that away from you. I’m going to help.” I’m codependent. I’ll admit that a 100%. It means that you’re a people pleaser. It means that you take on other people’s emotions, it’s your responsibility to try to fix. You’re trying to be selfless, right? It does sound like that, but at the expense of yourself is not good. (Dorian)

Tara gave an analogy that happened at one point in her relationship to illustrate:

We went for ballroom dancing, our first night this young girl was teaching us the steps to the waltz. She stopped us after about five minutes and she said to me, “You have to stop taking care of him and showing him where the steps are. He needs to learn them for himself.” She said to him, “You have got to start communicating to Tara where you’re going and what you’re doing. You can’t just go off on your own and do whatever you want to do.” And she nailed it. In five minutes, she nailed it.

Sophia's partner gave her evidence that co-dependence was his goal for her, and also something he could use against her later:

At the very beginning when we first started dating, he said, "I want you to need me and depend on me." [Later] I called him out on it. I'm like, "You said you wanted me to need you," and he throws it back in my face, saying, "I don't want you to depend on me and blah, blah." "You said that that's what you wanted."

Triggered Insecurities. This is a subcode of 'Co-Dependence' wherein at least five of the INTs knew the PNT well enough to deliberately push sensitive buttons and used PNT insecurities as a tool to diminish them.

Similarly to others, Valerie discussed that her partner would use her insecurities against her and as a manipulation tool to control her. Wendy said she and her partner triggered each other's past traumas, and that their different ways of coping with them, learned from their parents, made things worse. Robin expressed that her partner would push on specific sensitive spots to trigger insecurity, thus setting the stage for taking advantage of her later in a targeted way. Valerie echoed a similar sentiment, "I think he was very aware of a number of insecurities that I had. So, if you were to take advantage of them, which I think he did, he would be able to do so readily and very effectively."

Difficulty Trusting. This is a subcode of codependence which indicates that the PNT became uncertain at some point in the relationship about who they could trust because they may have overridden their instincts about their partner or had a different judgement about who that person was at first. The evolution of realizing that this person

who is supposed to care about them seems to want to destroy them, lead to this lack of trust, including in themselves. 11 participants reported experiencing this loss of trust.

Several participants spoke about not feeling safe with anyone or being unsure of who they could trust. Dustin explained, “Everybody around me started questioning me. So, I never felt safe with anybody. I constantly felt that I was just trying to explain myself to everybody all the time. And that is quite draining.” Some identified that a lack of trust from the relationship with their INT partners shows up in their new relationships:

I think he’s wonderful. We’ve been together for a while and twice, we’ve had sit-down chats to discuss some things, like our feelings and where we’re at and what we’re doing and some expectations, just kind of talking. And the first time that we did that, I was scared shitless. Like, grown-ass woman, scared, so scared to have this conversation. So, scared that I just agreed with every single thing because I didn’t want to rock the boat. Because it all came back. And, I was like, this is how you get through these. This is what you do. You just agree with all the things, and you go along with it, and you just deal with your own shit somewhere else because you don’t want to rock the boat. (Nancy)

Some of the other participants also addressed their now lower levels of trust in people.

Ani suggested that she may have “over-boundaried” herself out of protection and due to lack of trust. Rita stated that she, “will never believe again that a romantic partner will have my back” and Ruby specified, “Now I know I am much less trusting of a person than I was”. Jessica feels that this has been an ongoing issue post-relationship:

I feel not very confident in being able to determine who is a decent human being and who is not. Meeting new people, especially men, I feel very uncertain about that. And unsure of who I can trust. And even if I choose to hang out with somebody, still not really completely confident about how much I can actually trust them, especially men.

Fear of Loss. This is a subcode of ‘Co-dependence’ and indicates a heightened sense of investment in the relationship and a fear of losing what seems like everything. This subcode could include a fear of the unknown, of financial loss, not having a relationship, or a fear of rejection. 18 participants reported feeling a fear of loss, created by codependence or other factors which prolonged the relationship.

Robin felt that her partner was strategic in creating a sense of things that could be lost by breaking up to keep her in the relationship:

I think they’re just so skilled at just making you feel like you’re so worthless and invalid and that you don’t have any value to anyone. I guess you’re just so dependent on them. There was a sense of losing your entire world, because he created our entire world around him.

Eleanor and Cecilia spoke about how much was at stake:

Your only option is to leave your house, your children will no longer have an intact home. You will have to slip your finances. You will have to battle this person in a courtroom or around custody of your children and you know that’s not going to go well– My partner smeared my name all over the place. (Eleanor)

I was just so scared of leaving, so scared of what that would look like for me.

Would I be homeless? Would I lose everything? Would I lose my son? So many things went through my head. I was terrified. I didn't think I could do it on my own. I really didn't. I was so brainwashed to believe that this is my guy. This is the man that I'm going to live the rest of my life with. (Cecilia)

Several the participants spoke about a fear of being alone or rejected. Morgan feared losing the people that she loved. Valerie did not want to lose her connection to her partner as she felt he was her "rock to lean on":

Sometimes I think, "oh, what if I try to break things off now with this person?

Does that mean I will lose the love of my life forever? Does this mean I would be alone forever? Would anyone else like a person like me?" I thought that he was probably the most patient person to be able to deal with me.

Dorian and Una described the silent threat of their partners walking away if they didn't behave in the way that the INT wanted them to. Dorian said he wasn't happy for a long time but also fearful of the unknown. Nancy also echoed a fear of rejection:

I realize my epiphany was I was afraid. I was afraid of being rejected. I knew that I was trained from all those years that just get on with it. Just let him say what he's going to say. Have what he's going to have and do what he's going to do, and you can just keep humming along. I knew it was over before he said the words. Or I didn't know it was over. I was afraid that it was going to be over. This time, I was genuinely afraid. Oddly enough, it sounds very stupid to say, I was afraid to lose that relationship. It was a shitty relationship. I was afraid to not

be abused anymore. I was afraid to not be treated the way that I was treated and be told I was not worth anything. I was afraid to lose that. It's super messed up. Financial constraints were also involved with the fear of loss. Tara, for example, pointed out that her barrier to leaving had a great deal to do with finances, her children, and having no training and said that that was another incentive for her to get educated. She said her partner was blowing money as fast as it came into the house and wouldn't have been a reliable to help her out in any way.

Relationship Beliefs. This is a subcode of 'Longevity' and represents the beliefs around relationship and romance that may have contributed to staying longer in the relationship. Some of the participants recognized that they endorsed idealistic concepts such as, "marriage is forever", or that one must "fight" for the relationship "at all costs". 22 participants endorsed past beliefs of this nature.

Jessica, like others, believed in a specific marriage and family image. She was determined to find somebody to spend her life with and make a family. She felt certain that she could make any relationship work out, saying, "I'm good at that. That's like my superpower almost. I get along with most people." Megan expressed that she noticed in her relationships that she "will go above and beyond and then some. It's more of, I will not give up until almost until the other person doesn't give me a choice, where they leave me." She believed her partner's promises of the future, despite experiencing cognitive dissonance. In hindsight, Morgan has realized that what got her hooked over time was the dream of a happy family which she stated she may not have even known herself but that her partner picked up on and used to her disadvantage, "I worked so hard for love. I think

I would tell my former self that you never have to work hard for love versus all I knew at that time was to keep love, you keep working hard.”

Some of the participants went into their relationships believing that marriage was forever. Mia felt a strong sense that there was a divorce stigma from her family of origin. She believed that separation was not an option and that married people stayed together at all costs. She stated that she held a naïve sense of love and was sold on the romantic fairytale ideal. Nancy also felt a strong sense of commitment to maintaining the marriage at all costs, believing in the vows and legal document that said, “till death do us part”. Several participants also believed in the concept of “the one”, feeling that they were meant for each other. Dawn stated that she “thought [she] was swept off her feet” by the “one”. Claire trusted that the relationship was where she was “supposed to be and that we were meant for each other”. Valerie thought her partner was her “soulmate”. She believed that she always had to improve herself for relationships:

I just thought that this is what an adult relationship looked like, where there are consequences. Where there are stakes. Where people are going to be more emotional. It’s not like a high school relationship or even just a puppy love where you whisper sweet nothings to your partner. I was also thinking, is this right? Is this normal? But I didn’t have any answers.

Many of the participants endorsed the idea of being the dutiful partner and being there for their partner no matter what. Similarly to others, Eleanor highly valued relationships and believed that relationships needed to be maintained at all costs. She thought she had to try to rescue her relationship and self-sacrifice even while it was

nonreciprocal. “I don’t think it ever occurred to me to walk away from the relationship. In my mind, I thought, “If you choose to walk away from the relationship with me, that’s fine. But I will always be here.” Ani was raised to believe that you stay in a marriage even if it’s bad. That you had to have certain things in life and in relationships. She thought that now that she was married, she had she had to play a specific role:

I think I went into the dutiful wife position very easily. I fell into the role, and I said, “Okay, I’m married now,” and I think that was a cultural expectation for me. I grew up in a family where my parents were very religious, they were very stuck on roles and responsibilities. I think I just put my blinders on, and I just was like, “Okay, this is what I’m going to do.” And I think that was very helpful for him. I think that he ended up getting the things that he needed because I was going to take this role of the dutiful wife, which I did, absolutely.

I still wanted to believe that love could conquer all. And that I could help him to open up. There were moments when he did open up and I did see that raw vulnerable side. I was very taken with that. I am a tried-and-true believer in love, and I have a hard time giving that one up. I will persist long beyond the place that it’s actually still viable. (Una)

Rita mentioned that for her whole life she had wanted to be a unit of two instead of one.

She thought that she and her partner needed to go grow old together:

We joked when we wrote our wedding vows, “or will die trying.” And I died trying. That me died, without a doubt. That me died. I’m a different person. That me died. If I’m being slightly more dramatic, I would say he killed that me, but I

should probably own that I killed that me. But that me died. I will never believe again that a romantic partner would have my back.

Spiritual Beliefs. This is a subcode of 'Relationship Beliefs' indicating that participants were expected to marry, or once married to stay together and make the relationship work, or conversely, their spirituality was helpful in recovery. Some of the participants pointed out that faith does not often have a language to identify what is happening in the INT-PNT relationship. Others felt that coming back into touch with their spiritual beliefs helped to strengthen themselves. Seven of the participants reported experiencing this kind of pressure in their relationships, or alternatively, renewed faith.

I knew that I didn't want to marry him about three months before our wedding. I would say that I knew that I felt rather trapped. I grew up in a very Catholic family. I think about three months into the marriage, I wanted to escape, I wanted to try to get out of it. It was at that point my parents said, "Well, you're Catholic, you've gotten married, so you can't get divorced now, now you're stuck." (Ani)

Some participants were given the message that they had to do everything they could to save their marriages. For example, Elise said that while her friends were praying to save her marriage, her head was screaming "no":

And she starts, "God, please help these people see each other with clear eyes.

Help them save their marriage, nah, nah, nah." And my head started screaming, I don't have another go around in me. I don't have another attempt. I don't want to start something new and do it again and have it be the exact same. I want out.

There's nothing that's going to make this different. I've tried everything. I've pulled every lever I can. And I don't have it in me.

Vanessa stated that her faith is really important to her. She believed in marriage, forgiveness, and standing by your partner, however, points out that things got a bit convoluted in interpreting the concept of turning the other cheek:

Then I found God and I became a Christian. "I've got to be the best mom and best person. How could I ever think about leaving my marriage?" And so, I just dug in was the best, most subservient woman ever on the planet. I did everything.

She felt that she needed to be as gracious as possible and even had lunch with her partner's "new woman" Her church group advised her to press on because there is a plan. On the other hand, some friends let her know that her partner's behaviour was never okay. She felt that that was brand-new information, helping her to see through the deceptions from her partner. Eleanor asserted that the Christian community doesn't have a language for narcissism, which means that it's hard to get meaningful support within the community. She was finally able to find a Christian resource which helped her to walk away. Ruby's perspective on faith has changed:

Found a church to attend, although there's quite a great deal of spiritual charm that I experienced and so, my relationship with churches and with fundamental Christianity was quite shaken. But I didn't stop having faith in God, just in the whole organization.

In contrast to some of the participants, Ruby and Jessica found that praying, choir, volunteering, and meaningful work really helped to recover. Ava also discovered that

going to church was most helpful and said that her faith offered guidance and comfort during her relationship. She noticed what was missing from her relationship by reminders from her faith about caring principles, and felt she got clarity about what was truly needed in a relationship:

I felt like the more I went to church, the clearer things started appearing for me. I think because a lot of the bible talks about treating each other with love and kindness and patience and gentleness. R: So, you were recognizing that that wasn't happening [in your relationship]? P: Yeah.

Chosen. This is a subcode of 'Relationship Beliefs' and indicates that the participants felt special and chosen by their partner and that they had an important or extraordinary relationship which also served as a powerful connection to the relationship. Seven participants reported feeling expressly chosen by their partners.

Claire said that she felt like she was the exception sometimes when she would see so much of her partner's chaos happening towards other people. She could see him at times being vulnerable with her, "or at least what I thought or what I would interpret as being vulnerable". She felt special to have details of his life that no one else did:

It felt daring. It felt exciting in that, I'm not supposed to be dating him. A lot of unknown. He was very much a man of mystery. His job itself had to be very secretive anyway. I got to know a whole lot more about it down the road and especially living with him. I think he eventually kind of trusted me to disclose more things that other people don't know. I also felt like people looked at me and

placed me at a higher status or even “class”... the idea that I must be someone special just for being chosen by him.

Jessica said that they were choosing each other, that she felt that she was the right person for her partner. Valerie said that her partner made her feel “special and attractive”. At first, Rita believed she was “luckiest girl in the world”. Brooke was told by her partner that he had spoken to his mom and that he told his mom she was the right person for him (while still married). She felt special like she hadn’t for a long time because he would do gestures for her which seemed to suggest her importance to him. She said, “none of the negative stuff that’s happened to you and your life matters because you are the perfect person for them”. Eleanor pointed out that when her partner started showing interest in her, it felt like a complement because he really didn’t like anybody.

Binding. This is a subcode of ‘Longevity’ and represents the commitments that were made within the course of the relationships, including material goods, integrated family, friends, and kids, ownership of large items, and other intertwined facets of life that may have promoted a longer duration. At times participants felt that this was a strategic “carrot” on the part of their INT partner, when the INT sensed that the PNT might be thinking of leaving. 17 of the participants mentioned feeling bound to the relationship by their partner or the things that came along with the relationship.

Valerie found herself questioning at one point, “was it because I was also obsessed with a certain lifestyle? Is that why I chose to overlook some of these very troubling things in my life?” Nancy felt that all the material things that were happening in her relationship were hooks to keep her there. She felt there was no easy way out and that

she had been focusing on things and trips for distraction from problematic issues. Her partner would imply that she couldn't be mad at him for being away all the time because he had to keep working to support their expenditures. He made it very clear that there was no easy way out and that she could never afford these things by herself:

We did all the things. We got all those things fairly quickly. And it just started happening. Life just was being created around us very quickly. "You got all the things. You know the intent. We have a house and a dog and bla bla bla." I see now, "Was that just keeping me on the hook?" I don't know. These are things that I can speculate now but it makes you wonder. Life was just ticking along in the proper order. We're doing all the things and living life and building a life. I wonder was that like the ultimate bait on the stick? Because the bait was always there. There would be distractions for me to focus on and forget about the other things. And to know that maybe if I rock the boat, that trip will get cancelled or we wouldn't go. Then the babies were had. That next phase of lockdown was in.

Kyla also found that as increased integration happened, she became more bound to her partner's interests. She, like other participants, stated that pregnancy forced her to put her life on hold (such as school) but that this was firmly in her partner's plans. Vanessa also wanted out after three years of her relationship and had been planning to do so but then she got pregnant. She mentioned that when she would get close to leaving the relationship, she felt that her partner would sense it and offer incentives to stay such as a proposal, marriage, house, and family. This bound her to the relationship, and she did speculate that the incentives were possibly strategic:

At this point, I'm 100% thankful that they did what they did [cheating] because that was an out for me. I didn't really think of pregnancy as another one of those hooks, but it may have been. If it wasn't for that... Being in a relationship with him for the last several years wasn't fun. It wasn't a good place to be, but I don't think I would've had that push otherwise. I think we would've just continued on. Given how deep in I was, I don't think I would've found an exit otherwise.

A few of the participants reported that their partners told them in egregious lies to get them to stay. Brooke's partner claimed that he had received a disturbing letter in the mail about their relationship, but she now speculates that him telling her that was probably a bid for more control of the situation because he felt her pulling away. Mona's partner lied about suicide attempts and at the time she was afraid to call his bluff because she knew people who had killed themselves or tried to. She thought that the claim sounded weird but that she tried to trust him at the time. Claire stayed in her relationship because her partner claimed to have a cancer diagnosis:

He shared that he was diagnosed with lung cancer. I tried to go with him to appointments or things like that and he didn't want to. He wanted to go through this alone. He didn't want anybody to know. Now in hindsight I go, "Did he actually have cancer? Or was that another tool to keep me there?"

Trapped-Stuck. This is a subcode of 'Binding' that that indicates a feeling that the relationship is something different than what was first represented and that there would be reprisals when participants contemplated leaving. This might include facing their

partner's temper, isolation, financial hardships created by their partners, or feelings of helplessness. 13 participants indicated that they felt trapped or stuck.

Megan's partner had gotten her fired, and their business in common kept her around. "He was like you're screwed. You're stuck with me."

I knew what I needed to do. But I was so stuck. It's the best way to describe it. He had me. Getting away was something I wasn't capable of at the time. So, I stayed, and I'd justify everything. But I cried every single day. (Brooke)

Madeleine felt trapped into her marriage by her partner's false façade because she didn't have all the information about her partner before the commitment. Dawn was kept in place because she feared leaving her son alone with her partner:

By that point, you're in a bind. You've made this commitment. He was the father of my son, so it wasn't such an easy thing to walk away. That was one of the reasons the "intervention" didn't work. I was terrified of what he would do. You have to be pretty much an axe murderer in jail on death row before they'll not give you 50% custody. Especially when [son] was little, the thought of leaving him alone with [partner] was absolutely terrifying.

Rita realized she didn't have anywhere to go when she and her partner moved in together. "I can't move back to my perfect apartment, I have no money, we're having a disagreement about something pretty high-stakes, and going back to very stressful lives."

For Ani, pregnancy and a baby made leaving harder and she worried about finances:

Like "Oh, I need to keep you trapped. I need to keep you stuck. I need to make sure you can't leave. I need to create some sort of attachment to you." I think that

we were in so much debt that I was trapped financially. To give you an idea, I took on \$100,000 of debt when I divorced him. He forced the house to foreclose. It sold and he refused to sign the sale paperwork, so it was ordered sold by the courts. I was the one who paid back the bank. Once I had said I wanted to leave, I was willing to do whatever it took, but it meant taking on a terrible credit rating and a massive amount of debt. You can feel very trapped.

Iris suggested that she was “locked in” to her relationship. She felt trapped due to financial abuse, and it took a while to fully see the situation. She’d given up her career because of her children and was solely dependent on her partner. She did not know how she could get out with having two kids and not “a cent” to her name. She felt emotionally beaten down, especially while being watched all the time:

No place to live and no money and two young kids that I didn’t want him to have control over. Because he was not really that nice to them. So, I could see why women stay in abusive relationship to protect their kids.

Isolation. Becoming isolated from friends, family, and community was also cited as a reason for the longevity of the relationships and explained more fully in the ‘Controlled’ subcode.

Lack of Understanding. The feeling that people wouldn’t “get it” or believe the extent of the abuse is difficult to explain due to the cumulative and covert nature of it, promoted worries that there would be a lack of understanding if confessed. This subcode of ‘Isolation’ is more deeply explained under the ‘Controlled’ subcode.

Shame-Humiliation. This is a subcode of “Isolation” and represents the feeling of shame that participants may have had for “allowing” the abuse. There may have been less support from people around participants because the shame and humiliation prevented them from talking about what had been happening in their relationship. 14 participants indicated some elements of shame due to their relationship.

Kyla self-isolated in her relationship out of shame and felt that she “wasted time”. She is trying to come to terms with having been in a psychologically abusive relationship. Eleanor said that she was ashamed to find out that her partner had been attacking friends behind her back and driving them away without her knowledge. Wendy felt guilty telling her friends about her problems in her relationship while continuing to stay with her partner, isolating her further. Brooke confessed that she was more hurt and disgusted by herself that she was “even able to engage in a relationship” with her partner when she knew it was “wrong”. Dawn did not want people to worry about her and she was ashamed of having made such a “mistake” of being with her partner:

I didn’t want other people to know what was happening. Wanted to keep it a secret. Didn’t want to let people know what an appallingly big mistake I had made. Didn’t want people to worry at how sometimes terrifying it really was. Ava did not want to disrupt the picture-perfect image that others held of their relationship, “I was too embarrassed to tell my mom and my friends because nobody knew. Everybody thought our relationship was great and magical and perfect. So, I stayed.” Ruby confessed that initially after the end of her relationship she couldn’t talk about it without shame:

I was just so ashamed that I felt like I couldn't really function because I was so demoralized. "How could I let this happen?" I think that's part of the healing is initially I couldn't talk about it without feeling such incredible shame. And everybody who heard it, they'd be on the surface nice but inside, they'd be thinking "What is wrong with this person? She has a Master's in counselling. Like really?" So, I was just so aware of and thinking about constant judgment.

A few participants felt shame at the end because of the breakup process:

I also felt a lot of shame [crying] and isolation because I'm going through this separation, this divorce. And because it was my choice to do it, I think I felt even guiltier. I am a feminist. I have studied abuse and femicide. I have studied emotional abuse. I am an educated person. And I still have these moments where I feel so crappy for letting this ever have happen to me and not seeing it for what it was while it was happening. I still am in disbelief sometimes that I've let myself get into this relationship that was this abusive. I have to come to terms with it all over again it feels like. [crying] I just can't believe that I ever let it happen. I should have seen what was going on. I should have figured it out. And so, to come this far and have to explain to my friends and my family that he abused me but not in a way that leaves bruises. It still feels invalidating because he still denies that any of it happened, even after a year and a half of counselling. And he still does these gaslighting things. (Kyla)

Megan considered that the explanation of her relationship would be difficult for anyone to make sense of:

My shame and how embarrassed I was is nondescribable. I am very shameful in the sense that it almost feels surreal. Sometimes I can't even believe that happened. Or I'll start laughing because I cannot even believe that I'm telling this story that is my life. It almost feels like this horrible dream. Not only does it feel so wild that you couldn't even make that crap up. But I'm still very much aware that I question myself on that because he made me question so much, even though I know these things happened, there is that huge half of me if not a little bit more that's, like, "Did it though. Was it that bad? Are you just blowing this out of proportion?" And I think that sucks because that is still definitely very present.

Robin said that eventually therapy helped her to feel that it was not her shame to wear.

INT Personality. This is a subcode of 'Longevity', examining how the INT personality might have contributed to keeping participants in the relationship longer-term. This might include patterns with partners, family, and friends, and the public persona/private differences that were noted by participants. Because INTs were so able to draw their partners based on their façade, interpreting the negative behaviors in the relationship realm was made difficult because of the extreme dichotomy. This led to confusion for participants, which is discussed in other codes. All participants identified certain factors of their partner's personality that contributed to the longevity of their relationships, including the dichotomy of public versus private presentation, as related to narcissistic characteristics. Table 10 identifies narcissistic traits reported by the participants regarding their partner's personality, including DSM 5 (APA, 2013) criteria as well as vulnerable subtype traits as identified by research. Fantasies of Success and Envy have not been

included as these would have been difficult for participants to assess or to be aware of since they speak to an internal thought process of their partners.

Table 10

Partner-Reported Narcissistic Traits

Trait	Number of INTs
Grandiosity	28
Special Status	29
Needing Admiration	29
Entitlement	25
Exploitative	29
Lacks Empathy	29
Arrogant	22
Depressed	7
Insecure	29
Hypersensitive	26
Victimhood	29
Vulnerable to Stress	25
Vulnerable to Critique	29
TOTAL INTs	29

Note. Informed by the screening tool, interviews, DSM 5 (APA, 2013), and Brief-Pathological Narcissism Inventory- Partner Version results (Pincus, Ansell, Pimentel, Cain, Wright, & Levy, 2009).

It was clear from the data that most participants observed their partners actively managing their images in a specific and amplified way. Claire and Ruby identified that their partners wanted to be the “white knight” in situations (but would not necessarily follow through with the behaviours). Sophia’s partner also wanted others to rely on him, via wealth, and connections. Rita and Vanessa thought their partners were altruistic, kind, and helpful, but realised that devolved over time. Megan said that her partner “dressed to the nines” or presented a specific image depending on the situation, for example wearing

gym clothes to be considered an “athlete” in nonathletic environments. She spoke about her partner’s main objective for his actions:

His literal goal was that his name would be a household name and that he would go down in history. And everything would be a shrine and a monument and all this crap. And I believed him. I really did. Even though cognitively I knew that was wrong. But my belief system was very much intertwined with that.

As with others, Dawn stated that her partner used their joint finances to promote his image and status. Tara’s partner would buy her extravagant gifts that would be visible to others. Dustin mentioned that appearances were key to his partner and that she felt that she was the “most beautiful person on the planet”. Eleanor found that her partner attempted to cultivate an image of someone who is deep, bright, and melancholic and he enjoyed pontification. Elise’s partner cultivated an image that she termed, “super Mr. Humble salt-of-the-earth”, but that he was faking his relationships because they were all superficial. Mona’s partner promoted a similar self-image of kindness and generosity, with a romanticized view of love and the dramatics and “old school” values that accompany it. Brooke speculated that her partner, like many narcissists, wanted to think that he was unpredictable, risqué, and edgy. Iris stated that her partner liked looking good to others and would use their kids in service of that:

It’s all about the optics of him looking good. So, it’s not about really caring about you or the children, it’s about what makes him look good. I can’t even comprehend the mindset of that individual. What works for him, not for the kids. It’s not in the best interest for him so he’s not going to do it.

Some INT's had fantasies of success. It was important to Robin's partner that he could portray the status of her job to others and was very concerned about his identity as an actor, even though he could not support himself that way. Ani said that her partner wanted to look successful without doing the work. He was determined that she could not be more successful than he was so if she tried something he would attempt to do it also:

I studied to do law and all of a sudden, he wanted to become a lawyer. So, there were things that he did to make sure that I couldn't become smarter than he was. I think he wanted to look the successful person, but never really wanted to put too much effort into being a successful person, felt he was entitled to it. He lost every job he ever had during the course of our marriage and was always shocked and surprised when he got fired and couldn't figure out why they would let him go because he was just so amazing. He refused to have our son not in daycare, because what if he had a job interview and what would it look like if our son was home. People would know that he was unemployed. And everything was going to be about him being successful. And it was always kind of a next thing, like a next adventure. Like "Oh, first I'm going to be a district manager and I'm going to sell lots of things. I'm going to do great at that." And that didn't work, so "Now I'm going to go to law school, although I don't have a bachelor's degree yet and I haven't studied for my LSATs" and "Oh, now I'm going to become a realtor."

There was always this other thing that he was pursuing.

Some participants identified moments where partners presented as exploitative. For example, Valerie mentioned her partner's work setting. "He often said, that people need

to be squeezed like a lemon. Like customers or vendors who weren't willing to comply to our standards and demands." There were times when Tara noticed her partner ignoring professional ethics, such as hiring inappropriate people for positions in his office when they were also patients. She felt validated in her feelings about him by his psychiatrist who refused to do further therapy with him:

This psychiatrist said to him, "I can't see you anymore. It's banging my head against the wall. You can't be my patient anymore." And he said, "Oh, I was thinking of going into analysis with you," and he said, "You can go into analysis, but it won't be with me." I felt like phoning up the psychiatrist and thanking him.

Other INTs felt a sense of entitlement, such as Dawn's partner who required her to financially support all his fleeting next big ideas:

Any kind of toy. He'd start a new business. "I'm going to do construction. I need every possible new tool available and a new truck. I don't want to do construction anymore. I want to be in business. You know what would make me feel really good in business? I want a Lexus because then I'll really be important." "I want to get my pilot's license. Forget just paying for it. I want you to buy me a plane."

Some participant's talked about how extreme confidence really presented. For example, Eleanor noticed that even on their first meeting her partner was arrogant and obnoxious. He could be standoffish and act like he was better than everyone else. In some cases, this would take the form of grandiosity, such as with Robin who noticed her partner's penchant for "extreme vanity". Ruby's partner equated himself to Jesus in that people always misunderstood him and his amazing gestures. Vanessa said about her partner,

“He’s a superhero- he does everything big”. Megan spoke about the fact that her partner “talked big” and was arrogant as well, presenting an image of greater success than he had. Since his biggest goal was to go down in history, he was willing to lie about his achievements to that end:

We would go into these ridiculously expensive stores, and he would put on this literally thousand-dollar horrible velvet and leather jacket and make me take pictures of him. And he would be pretending that we owned the diamond mining company, and can I bring my own diamond from my own diamond mine and then you could set it? And all this shit. And it wasn’t a joke. It was dead serious. He would always tell people that he had 50 different degrees whenever it would benefit him. He has nothing, zero education, but just what he would learn from other [people], he just applied that to everything. Everything of course has to be top end and the fanciest of the fancy.

Some partners seemed to have a belief in how special they were. For example, Valerie’s would favorably compare himself with other people of status.

Many of the INT partners sought out admiration from others in a variety of ways. Ruby stated that her partner needed his prowess as an athlete to be affirmed by her and others, and that she had to play the role of the cheerleader. That his identity as an athlete was always the topic of conversation. Tara’s partner didn’t have a strong connection to his actual work, but rather fed off the admiration that he would get in his career:

He’s talked about being empty and has worked incredibly long hours seeing patients, and he’s even said, “Part of my ability to do that is because emotionally I

don't get as connected." But he also has extremely poor boundaries in his profession because that just feeds him. They think he's a god of some sort.

A lack of empathy was noted by all participants, and they found that their partners would not want or allow PNT emotional states to play a role in the relationship. As Ani said, her partner was "self-absorbed" and not interested in anything outside of his own needs and wants. Eleanor pointed out that her partner could not relate "normally" because of his lack of empathy. Cecilia gave an example that her partner chose to play Xbox with his friends over coming with her to the hospital while she was in labour and needed him.

He will always, at a very base level be looking out for himself first. No matter what's going on. There's no self-reflection. There's no true altruism. There's altruism for altruism as a tool. But he's always in image management. And he's incapable of intimacy. Or that intimacy itself, like between human beings is not in his emotional vocabulary. I think he fakes relationships because it's what people do. But when push comes to shove, his friendships... all his relationships are very, very superficial. (Elise)

Some participants recognized that their INT partners seemed insecure or overreacted to perceived criticism. Mia said that her partner had, "little man syndrome". Dawn pointed out that her partner chose confident and successful income earners but responded to feelings of intimidation by trying to extinguish all of these positive qualities. Brooke speculated that her partner used methods of control to try to fix how insecure he was about himself and his life, and to convince himself that he was happy, "it's like he's robbing from people so he can feel better about himself. Because he can't look in a

mirror. He doesn't like what he sees." Rita said that she realized and accepted that her partner "fit the bill" for a vulnerable narcissist. Elise talked about how her partner had a sensitivity to any perceived slight and that she couldn't talk to him directly because he couldn't hear about his "stuff" without taking it as a very deep criticism of himself as a person. She said that he would lash out at anyone who would make demands on him:

My husband identifies as everyone's victim - through and through. What consistently amazed me was that he's a smart guy, but he believes every aspect of his own narratives. Even when held up against clear logic, he'd find a way to keep them intact. My husband seems to 100% believe his own bullshit.

Morgan also noticed this victimhood, realizing that her ex is a covert narcissist. She said that he was also so gloomy and draining and would make life miserable for her and others if he was doing something he didn't want to do. Ava said that her partner countered all her positivity with negativity, chasing "external happiness that is never achieved".

Charming Façade. This is a subcode of 'INT Personality' and represents the dichotomy of many of the INTs' personalities. They are generally successfully able to draw people in but have no trouble showing a different side to partners who are now intertwined in the relationship or to those who have fallen into disfavor somehow, having both a public and private persona. This was not as strong a dichotomy in the narratives of participant who reported more vulnerable traits. This means that INTs often have credibility or likeability with others because of how they present. 20 participants commented on their partner's charming façades.

Tara indicated that her partner was a charmer, and that his, “light was so big and shining, it dwarfed everything”. She said that she could “know” people, but for him there’s always a “special connection”. Claire pointed out that her partner was more like a social chameleon in that he could pour on the charm and be funny and smart, however he could also turn aggressive when it suited the moment to get him what he wanted. She noticed that he had an ability to socialize with anybody at their level, “He came across as so charming, intelligent, professional, and successful that everyone around him adored him or really respected him.” As with others, Valerie’s partner was not only charming, but he had a great deal of charisma. Ani said:

He’s very charismatic. He draws you in. He was the star of the football team at our university. He was very attractive. He had lots and lots of people around him. Women were constantly swooning all over him. And he was very funny, and he really talked a good game. Like “You would be so lucky to be with me.”

Rita said that her partner is one of the most likable people she’s ever met in her life. She felt that all people love him, and they would say that he was a kind lovely person who they could talk to, “I’ve never seen someone work a room like he works a room. And, without being a bragger. I shouldn’t say he charms the pants, but he had an ability to work a room like I’ve never seen before.” She said that he would ingratiate himself and seemed knowledgeable and wonderful.

The private and public persona that INTs would present was markedly different for most of the participants. For example, Robin spoke about her partner who presented himself in a certain way to attract with looks and charm and would wooing heavily. He

presented as being more stable than he actually was and would use her job title as a form of status, but in private would not support her achievements. She said that people could see the surface of him but not often the full depths of his behaviours and the consequences to herself. Likewise, Kyla said that her partner was also charming, with a big smile, and would always be the centre of attention. He was socially adept, attractive, and fun; however, he had a different persona for public than for her:

He refuses to do anything that would be a sacrifice to put us in a better position because he has to put forward this façade of himself as being successful and doing well. He has to be able to go out with his friends. He has to be able to go on trips. He has to be able to buy new clothes. I think he bought three times as many new clothes in our relationship as I did. He wants to have this ostentatious car. He wants to put out this image of himself as, I'm in my mid 30s. I'm doing great. There's no problems here. And meanwhile we can't buy groceries. The way that he is behind closed doors is always very different from the way he is in public.

Brooke feared losing her job because of her partner's believability over hers:

And the problem is, narcissists often to others look like the most amazing people and he did. He came off as brilliant with work. So kind, so caring, so sweet. All the [people] that worked with him absolutely adored him. He's quite good looking. He looked like Joey from Friends. He had this way about him... guys loved him because they thought he was a guy's guy. He was good at golf. He had the best of the best. And women loved him, so guys wanted to be around him. He just had that persona that if he had said something to my boss, he truly made me

believe, and I do still to this day, believe that I would have been the one that would have been at fault. That he would have been the victim in all of this.

Ruby's there were so many red flags about her partner that she chose to ignore because of his "charmingness". Mia elaborated on her partner's ability to fool other people with his charisma and charm, "one thing that I still struggle with is his ability to deceive everybody around him."

Mona pointed out that her partner could be charming at times, however that wasn't his defining characteristic. The difficulties came more from swinging between personalities:

I've read some about people who are narcissistic, and it irritates me a little bit because they're not all charming. They don't all have that facet. My partner could be charming sometimes. It's more so, I think, about that delta between the highs and the lows, just being so erratic. Maybe it's less about characteristic, whether they're charming or whether they're not, and just more about the highs and the lows. They're obviously getting something out of that.

In Cecilia's case, while her partner could be funny, cute, and charming, she was thankful that a lot of people "hated" him because he was so "opinionated and crass about everything", an "asshole" at times. This meant that she was not the only person who saw behind the façade.

INT Family of Origin (FOO). This is a subcode of 'INT Personality' and represents how the INT family of origin may have contributed to the atmosphere of the relationship and overall longevity by providing a model of behavior or through enabling

(see 'Enabling' for additional details). 12 participants spoke about their partner's families as being a factor in the relationship difficulties and longevity.

Iris pointed out that her partner's mother seemed to be a narcissist, was very controlling, and scrutinized her as well on behalf of her partner. Rita elaborated that she felt that it was always three on one, that her partner and his mother were completely enmeshed, and that they enabled their son's behaviour:

His parents are characters out of a novel. They are raging narcissists. They are infamous. People would come up to me and they'd grab my sleeve and would say, "Are you doing okay? This family is going to eat you alive. Keep your head above water. Be careful." And he's the only child. He was special and he was cherished, except they were hypercritical. They were monsters to me. They are monsters to just everybody.

Wendy said that her partner had been taught to "repress his emotions and paint everything as rosy". Brooke's partner was adamant that he didn't want to be like his father who was an extreme womanizer. This led her to believe that she was safe with him, contrary to what she discovered about his true personality:

One thing that he always talked about was how his dad was a womanizer and had several different partners even when he was a child. And how he never wanted to be that man and how he wanted to love the woman he was with, wa, wa, wa.

Kyla felt that her partner learned his financial values from his FOO. She noticed a parallel dynamic in her relationship to that of his parents, including requiring her to leave her job and her partner's financial control of the household. She also faced verbal attacks

from her partner's family and was blamed for perceived wrongs. She came to realize that her partner and family's perspective served only him, and that she was always going to be the scapegoat. She was blamed for the fact that her partner was giving less support and time to his family. She believes that the elements of control in her relationship were strategic and modelled by her partner's family. Robin found that her partner's mom enabled continued unhealthy contact of her even after their relationship ended.

Around a third of the participants either didn't refer to their partner's families or indicated that they were not as described by the INT, and that the INT was estranged due to their own behaviors or choice. For instance, Dorian's partner could not seem to get along with her family and he empathized with all the problems she claimed they created for her, until he realized later that his partner was likely one of the main problems. Wendy's partner had also been badmouthing his family and she found that they were nothing like he had described, that they were "nice".

In Summary, the longevity of the relationships seemed to be driven by the inability to imagine life away from the INT and the inherent difficulties that surrounded leaving, rather than a true desire to stay in the relationships. Participants reported feeling that they did not have the mental head space to implement leaving and were out of touch with their own emotions as a survival mechanism. This meant that caretaking of the self was often neglected or not a consideration at all. Family of origin, culture, beliefs, and personality factors of both members of the dyad may have normalized the idea for PNTs of staying at all costs. In addition, the logistical concerns of leaving could seem insurmountable, including financial, support, and other safety nets.

Recovery and Leaving

This fourth theme that the data revealed represents the time-period in which the PNT might be reaching their end point of tolerance and gaining some of their own autonomy back again, leading towards ending the relationship, or alternatively to the INT ending the relationship. Often when the INT left, it was for another partner, or they became unhappy with the real-life demands of a relationship and needs of their current partner. At this stage, the PNT more clearly understands INT patterns and realizes that INT behaviours may be the largest problematic issue in the relationship. As well, they may have identified and worked on ways that their own history or personality might have kept them in this relationship longer than was healthy. This theme includes the coping and recovery strategies that the PNT may have used, or is currently using, to move on.

It was observed that the recovery process for many participants began even before they left the relationship or before their partners left them, suggesting that perhaps their increased independence from the relationship was not looked upon favorably by their partners. However, in many of the participants' narratives, regardless of gaining a sense of self again, most reported feeling generally low about themselves. This later stage of the relationship was, for the most part, characterized by heightened conflict and/or extreme moments of withdrawal by the INT partner as a mode of punishment and control. By this point, most participants had been planning escape routes for part of the relationship, in some cases for years, despite the factors listed in the Longevity code that kept them lingering. 16 of the relationships were ended by the PNT and one was a mutual decision. The most common reason for the PNTs to finally end the relationship was due

to INT cheating. Particularly when the PNT ended the relationship, the separation process was rocky and highly conflictual, especially concerning finances and children. The INT often continued to harass or monitor the PNT in these cases. Please see Appendix D for the Code Hierarchies map.

Self View- End

This main code represents the participants' view of themselves around the end of the relationship. Some of the common threads between participants included low self-worth and confidence, feeling unentitled to their own feelings, financially insecure, and confused or foggy about what had happened.

Ruby stated that she felt she couldn't really function because she was so "demoralized". Dorian described himself like a "beaten dog" and that his relationship was "crushing" because he would not know what version of his partner he would encounter once he got home. Like others, Megan explained how difficult it was for her to make any decisions by that point because of her self-worth and confidence being stripped away. She also felt that she could not "stand my ground" or commit to anything. Many of the participants also described a sense of being robbed of who they were as people. Sophia communicated how she grew to dislike herself over time in the relationship. She felt that she had become too angry and not driven enough, especially once the relationship was ending. She elaborated that this made her feel weak, and that she was too dependent on her partner, "without him, my world is gone". She reported feeling "lonely and sad, dead inside", as well as unlovable. Cecilia similarly spoke about feeling "broken and bleeding". She was feeling "haggard, ugly, and saggy" because that

was what her partner had been telling her she was towards the end. Rita suggested that she was, “completely shattered and destroyed. Like a disco ball that’s been hit with a crowbar. Absolutely shattered. I was confused about boundaries.”

He stripped everything away from me. I no longer felt attractive. I no longer felt smart. I no longer felt like I could get my shit together. I think when you hit rock bottom, the only place to go is up. I think I really got to that point where I would have died for him. It was ridiculous what he had done to me. But it robs people of what they could be, their happiness, their desires for doing things in life. (Brooke)

Like others, Mona came to a point of realization about herself:

Because everything you learn about yourself you hate. And you don’t even remember if that was there before anyway. You don’t even remember if that’s new, or if that’s actually who you are. And if it is, “Ew, I hate myself.” That’s why it eventually fell apart, because I said to him, “I cannot be in this relationship with you and not hate myself.”

Morgan felt that she had stopped developing, saying, “the relationship really felt like it stalled me, stalled my life. It stopped me from growing.”

Some of the participants described a sense of uncertainty, that they were having trouble deciding how they felt about their own emotions or perceptions and that they did not trust anyone at that point because they felt they could not trust their own judgement. Vanessa confirmed that the relationship “messes with your head in the sense of thinking it was me. He only did those things because I wasn’t enough. So, it just is, like... it goes around and around and around to the point of it’s crazy making.” She did point out

however, that what she suspected about her relationship proved to be true. Robin suggested that her partner's behavior had made her feel like she was a "bad" partner, and that she came to the end "not knowing who to trust". Mia expressed a similar difficulty in trusting anyone, that she was in "survival mode", scared to leave, and felt "jaded". Rita also still feels distrust of romantic partners and confused about boundaries.

Many of the participants reported already gaining strength or independence back by the time the relationship was nearing an end in a somewhat contradictory fashion to the above sentiments. Kyla elaborated that she was working on her plan to get a job and leave, aided by meeting someone who helped her to see her value. She felt her self-esteem increased and she was able to identify what she wanted to do with her life. It was at this time that she realized the feeling of dependence was an illusion. Wendy felt that she was finally listening to her instincts. Claire found that having a fulfilling career brought her a new sense of self-efficacy and she no longer had to play a role for somebody else. Vanessa also talked about becoming more of herself again once she got back into her rewarding career, stating that she had abandoned a lot of her beloved work previously in favor of the relationship. Megan realized that she'd grown a lot in the relationship and reflection saw that her "capacity to learn and to do things under pressure and in very treacherous circumstances is undeniable". Despite feeling that her confidence had been torn down, she gained a lot of confidence from that knowledge. Ava was feeling "empowered" towards the end and Tara started to feel "rebellious". Ani said that during her breakup she was her most confident self and was amused to think about it. She explained that it was because she stopped putting up with "bullshit".

Lost Self. This is a subcode of ‘Self View- End’ and indicates a sense of feeling drained and not knowing the self anymore. Some participants described this akin to being an “empty shell”, that they had immense self-doubt, or no longer trusted themselves. 27 of the participants reported feeling that they had lost themselves.

Interestingly, several participants referred to self-doubt as something self-created by questioning themselves as opposed to putting blame on their partner or the dynamic. For instance, Madeleine said she started second-guessing herself and it got worse as the relationship went on. Iris stated that she experienced self-doubt because everybody thought that her partner was so great that they must’ve wondered, “What’s the matter with you?”. Because of this she was likewise second-guessing her own decisions.

I was definitely not aware of my own feelings. I think that I may have planted a lot of doubts in my own mind about the kind of person I was. Thinking well, “Maybe I’m just not very in tune with my feelings. Maybe I’m just not wise enough to realize my own deficiencies. Or maybe I was, or maybe I was too paranoid. Maybe I was too insecure.” So, it felt like it was easier for me to blame myself as opposed to blame him. (Valerie)

Vanessa felt that because she had lost herself, it was no wonder her partner didn’t “like” her anymore, but eventually stopped believing it was her issue, “I realize I had abandoned myself and given away all my power, my control because I didn’t feel good about myself. I believed everything that was said. Until I couldn’t believe it anymore because it just stopped adding up.”

Some participants delineated that INTs seemed to make deliberate efforts to strip their sense of self. Elise spoke about undercutting, implied criticism, and regular blame that her partner would do, causing panic attacks and to doubt her every move. Tara stated that her partner would actively work to convince her that her ideas were incorrect, so she believed that she must be perceiving things incorrectly or not measuring up in some way. Because of this, she got really “entrenched” and lost who she was. Robin questioned herself right from the beginning because of things her partner would say:

The first thing he said at the door when he hugged me was, “I’m so glad that you don’t look like your picture.” Those little things over time create a lot of doubt in your own mind that you have value and that you have worth. So, I think he was very conniving from step one.

Wendy felt that her ‘self’ became subsumed by her partner. She felt that she couldn’t be a whole person with him around or be comfortable:

He made me feel like it wasn’t valid, the feeling. I think one of the strongest feelings was I felt I didn’t have a sense of self. I couldn’t identify what I liked. I didn’t feel I liked anything. I felt like he was so passionate, he had all these interests. And I in comparison felt very flat.

Many also mentioned a feeling of being hollowed out or an absence of the self. The term “empty shell” and the sentiment came up frequently in the narratives. Ava talked about not being her “carefree self” around her partner because of the constant second-guessing, which is something she didn’t recognize until later. Rita expressed that she “died trying” to make the relationship work, and she lost her self-respect until she had some distance

and therapy. Megan articulated, “At the time I literally referred to myself as an empty shell of a human. There was nothing left. It was heavy, dark. I was miserable.” Una realized that she had stopped remembering who she was, and she stopped talking about or engaging with what made her identity. Her friends pointed out that when she went away, she would come back as herself, but then quickly disappear around her partner:

“I stopped remembering who I was outside of being in that relationship.” There were just these little moments over time where I stopped talking about or engaging in things that made me as a person. I didn’t see that happening. And I think that kind of surprised me in retrospect to look back and say, “Oh, it was just this series of events that completely eroded my self-confidence and my belief in myself as a resilient strong person.” And I didn’t expect that to happen.

A few participants alluded to the damage that the extreme focus on their partners had on them, and the preponderance of INT taking without giving, which gave rise to a loss of self for them. Kyla elaborated:

While we were together, I don’t think I focused on myself at all. It was a lot of what I could do to make his life easier. I think I lost a lot of myself. And I think it was after the separation that I started really learning about myself or discovering or rediscovering or remembering things about what I wanted to do or who I was. I just lost my direction a lot. I didn’t do things or put things in place for myself.

Cecilia noted that she felt like there was a dark cloud hanging over her during her marriage and that she couldn’t be herself or free to express her views and opinions if they weren’t also her partner’s:

“Oh my God, I just want to go back and give her a hug and say, you’re okay and you’re going to be good. And just move on. Do what you need to do to get yourself back.” I never even knew who I was until the last couple of years. I was such a shadow of him and other relationships I had had.

Claire spoke about her many moments of self-doubt and how this was brought on by having to deplete herself in favor of keeping her partner happy, “And then you’re not actually going to get what you need until I have milked you completely”. Brooke confessed that she felt like a “broken shell” of herself. At the time, she didn’t trust herself to pick herself up again, “They can take the strongest, most beautiful-inside-and-out person and literally strip everything away from them, leaving them corner naked with almost the inability to speak because they no longer know who they are.” Mia suggested that she didn’t feel whole again until well after the relationship was over. Sophia is experiencing self-doubt and insecurities even now. She suggests that this is happening especially because she sees her ex-partner flourishing.

End- Fallout

This main code represents the end of the relationship and what happened for some participants in the aftermath of the breakup. Some PNTs developed a plan well in advance of leaving and those who did choose to end the relationships almost universally found themselves in high conflict with their soon-to-be ex-partner. In contrast these participants typically felt stronger self-worth by that time than participants whose partners ended the relationship.

Several participants noted that their increasing state of independence and resistance precipitated their break-ups, either related to starting to get back to their sense of self and feeling strong enough to end the relationships, or alternatively observing that their partners seemed to feel threatened by this. Ani stated, “I actually think I found myself in my breakup. I think I actually was the most confident I’ve ever been”. For some participants, this meant that they were no longer as willing to cater to their partners imbalanced needs or to perform ego-soothing duties.

I remember what I was good at. I started to meet people. I was excited and that’s when we started fighting a lot. That’s when our relationship started to turn down. I started to think, “Well, he just doesn’t like that I’m suddenly getting attention.” Because I was getting attention again for what I was doing. We started to fight a lot, and then he started to disappear and go out really late and travel a lot for work. So didn’t come home. (Vanessa)

Some felt that the relationships had become increasingly transactional or that there was a great deal of distance between them and their partners on an emotional level. In a few cases, the contrast between potential new partners and their INT partner revealed striking gaps between relationship-positive behaviors and the unhealthy dynamics that existed with their current dyads and partners.

At least half of the PNTs had been planning to leave their relationships, some from the first few months, Ani saying, “I remember fantasizing about what it was going to be like to tell people that I was getting a divorce, from a very, very early stage”. The barriers to leaving have been discussed in other codes, however, the main themes of these

were the absence of safety/security or lack of confidence to leave the relationships. For almost all participants who left their partners, it was an agonizing decision to breakup. Jessica related that it was the most difficult thing she had ever done to date, including participating in the Olympics. Claire discussed why she finally knew that she had to go: I

I was very torn, as usual. But in a more drastic way. It was kind of the duty, this is what a good partner is supposed to be, and I'm supposed to care for this man. And if I say that I love him, then I'm supposed to do all these things. And the feeling of finally realizing that I had been a frog in hot water and the temperature was getting really damn high. And it felt like if I don't get out now I might never.

Of crucial concern, many of the participants felt that they had to be strategic about leaving and to carefully plan for their own safety and security:

I started building the scaffolding to get out. I had in my calendar November 1st for 10 years. Counting down till I could leave when my son was 18. The one piece that was not falling into place was the financial piece. But I was rebuilding my social connections intentionally. Separating myself and planning to leave in stages. I was keeping my resume alive as part of my leaving process. (Elise)

Dawn expressed that she felt unsafe to initiate the breakup and that her partner had to believe it was his idea for her and her child's benefit:

When he did lock me out, it was traumatic and everything, but it was also an enormous relief because I felt, certainly for that two years, that if I initiated it, there would be hell to pay. If he initiated it, I felt like it was a relief. Even though he blamed me, he couldn't be angry at my action. It wasn't a betrayal. He

would've been so much more angry at betrayal, at whatever that had made him feel – desertion, the whatever. So, it being his decision was a relief in some ways. Over half of the participants described what felt like the final straw of their relationships, the most common reason being their partner's infidelity(ies). Tara stated:

He hired this woman who was totally inappropriate, and they ended up having an affair, ended the office, ended the marriage, ended everything. I literally felt that he couldn't tolerate me being equally as accomplished and having both our names on the door and that he literally wanted to screw me over. Maybe not consciously.

Mona was concerned about her partner's cheating, lying, and betraying confidences, however, the final straw for her was her partner's "extremely bad judgment-call in terms of parenting". Christmas morning was a breaking point for her, and she stated in her own head, "Zero percent of me wants to be in a relationship with you or is open to any kind of relationship with you.":

I told him that I was unhappy and I kind of primed him for it coming, but I knew for me if I said it, it was done. And just it eventually got to a point where I was just, "There's nothing left." I could count the number of times that my heart had broken and there was no coming back.

The cumulative effect of the INT partners' behavior set the stage for many of the final breakups, for example in Valerie's case:

At some point it started to shift where I thought maybe I'm not completely responsible for all the conflicts. Maybe it wasn't my fault that I'm mad he's

sexting other women. Or maybe some of his stories didn't necessarily add up. It

definitely took a while to build up the courage and confidence to confront him.

For Ani, the final moment was realizing she was the only one putting energy into the dyad and household, and that being away from her partner was easier:

Now he's gone and he can do nothing, and I don't have to see it, and I still have all the same responsibilities that I have, but relaxed [laughs]. Like I was emotionally almost absolved of all the anger I was carrying. So that I think was the moment where I realized, "oh, I'm leaving my marriage. Subconsciously I started preparing for that. I called him the next day and asked for a divorce.

Some participants were able to pinpoint catalysts for the breakdown of their relationships.

Please see Table 11 for "final-straw" moments (realizations which resulted in the permanent end of the dyad).

Table 11*“Final-Straw” Events*

Participant	Event
Madeline*	When she allowed INT to see she was smarter than him
Mia	Cheating
Claire	High conflict, saving self from abuse
Valerie	Realization that she is not always to blame, building courage to confront
Ani	Realizing being alone is not harder
Ava*	Taking "me time" (independence), realizing her partner doesn't care about her feelings
Sophia*	Calling INT out on cheating
Jessica	Red Flags, questioning just what she was trying to save
Dustin	INT lack of accountability
Eleanor	Not meeting her partner's imbalanced wants/needs, INT game playing
Cecilia	Cheating
Wendy	Contrast with potential partner, increased confidence
Brooke	Increased feeling of strength
Morgan	Cheating, controlling behavior
Elise	Increased independence
Tara	Cheating, partner spending
Mona	Cheating, bad parenting judgement call
Iris	Control, requiring her to socialize after not allowing her to see her dying father

Note: Participants with an asterix were not the ones to end the relationship.

In some of the cases once the INT realised that participants were truly ready to leave them, they attempted to woo their partners back with apologies and positive behaviors, in at least one case vocalized to friends that these apologies were a strategy.

For at least a third of the participants, the ending came very suddenly, and in at least one of the cases the INT sent a text message, another couple just didn't come home. Some partings were seemingly not apropos of anything in particular that was happening

in the relationship, as Robin said, “When we split, we split because he woke up and he was like “I don’t love you” out of the blue at 7 o’clock in the morning”. Others were the result of a final blowout. “Two years felt like ten years. It was very tumultuous the entire way through. And when it finally ended, it ended with a bang”. (Megan) In almost all cases, participants mentioned that their partner blamed them for the ending, sometimes claiming that the PNT had something medically or psychologically wrong with them:

I told him that I wanted a divorce and he screamed at me that I had never let him try, almost as if I had never spoken to him about all the problems that were going on in the relationship. So, in that moment, I realized that he was completely oblivious and had never heard anything that I had ever said or at least was acting as if he had never heard. (Ani)

“You have some type of chemical or hormonal stuff going on in your brain. There is a lot of stuff wrong with you. If you listen to me, we can talk about this in a couple of months when you get yourself back on track. But do not go see a doctor. You need to go to a naturopath. Spend the money. Doctors are just going to tell you that there’s nothing wrong with you. You have things wrong in your head. You’re delusional.” (Megan)

Sophia speculated that her partner waited for an excuse to blame her for the end:

I think when he left me, he created this fight to justify how he was treating me because he was seeing her already. He waited for that opportune time for me to lose my shit, which was, he didn’t come home for a night. I don’t know if he was just sitting around waiting for me to get mad.

Some INTs tried to convince PNTs that they were leaving them for their benefit:

He announced that he was releasing me from our marriage. He was doing me a favour. He knew how I loved [my country] and how much I wanted to be with my mom. And so, he was doing it as a favour to me. It was breaking his heart, of course. And then, “Oh by the way, I’m having an affair with my hairstylist who is 30 years younger.” (Ruby)

“I just want you to know that I’m doing all this for you. And this is for your benefit. I really want to see that you get healthy in your head and in your mind, and maybe you’ll lose weight.” And I was not fat. I was not anything. (Megan)

Most participants described an increase in conflicts leading up to the end. For many, these were especially heightened in the time just preceding the breakup and particularly egregious in divorce proceedings. Participants often used the terms “messy”, “ugly”, “blowout”, and “dramatic” to describe the endings. In a few circumstances, there was police involvement at the end. Often children were put in the middle by the INT or used later as leverage for court (This is explained more fully in the High Conflict code below):

The cherry on top was he said, “I’m going to tell the child that as soon as he’s able to hear, that his mom doesn’t love him. That’s why he’s in daycare.” And so at that point I literally put my kid to bed, and I made this list of what I would need to make on my own to be able to leave. (Kyla)

Vindictive behavior by the INT was exceptionally common in the aftermath of the breakups, especially, but not limited to when the PNT initiated the end (16 PNTs initiated the breakup, 1 was mutual. See Table 12 and the ‘Vindictive Backlash’ code for more

information). Participants often spoke about the frustrations in being unprotected legally from the type of emotional abuse perpetrated by their INT partners. Many married INTs used the court system to their advantage and would weaponize custody processes against their partner. This included hiding important information, particularly about finances, forcing imbalanced settlements or allowing excuses for INT behaviors.

The court process was extremely disappointing. I felt like all that happened is that they took \$70,000 from what I had in the family home and didn't help me. Three days in court for a full-on trial is \$30,000, which I didn't have anymore at all. So, I was forced to settle. (Ava)

It seemed there were a lot of things that [lawyers] would do or say to smooth things over, and always making excuses or liberties for him. I was never given those freedoms to just lose my mind. So, I found that really frustrating. (Mia)

Many participants described the end of their relationships as a relief:

I do not miss her at all. I grieved that relationship even before it was done, and when we separated, I felt a huge weight was off my shoulder. I really don't recommend divorce, not at all. [laughs] Having said that, it's the best decision she's ever made, to initiate this. I'll thank her for that one day. (Dorian)

When I finally told him, I felt relief. So, I felt like my instincts were right. But he refused to accept it, and he just didn't believe it. So, it felt like there wasn't really this conclusive situation. It just ended up becoming very messy. (Wendy)

The more that he did those type of things, the more that I was like, "Oh, I've made a good decision. I'm so happy that I made this decision." I felt it just was so

amazing every time he did something like that. I was like, “Oh, thank you. I have so much gratitude towards you for being such a terrible person.” (Ani)

Most participants indicated that they walked away from their relationships feeling that their partners had been using them to their own ends. Morgan stated, “I was just like a gold mine at the time, that over time, that he had used up all that was there. Now, he was ready to just ditch and leave.” Others discussed that their partners still wanted to keep in touch so that they could receive services, support, or continue to control. Robin mentioned, “His thought in that was that he was going to move into our spare room, and I was still going to take care of him and financially support him.” Megan’s partner wanted her to continue to work for him for free. A few INTs stalked and harassed the participants, which is examined in the Surveilled code below.

Some participants expressed that recovering from the breakup was especially challenging due to factors such as the emotional abuse, confusion, and loss of self and perspective. Additional participants described deep states of depression, including temporary alcohol misuse, and extreme absence of self-care. Morgan indicated that she was so traumatized, that it took six months before she had full recall of the events of her relationship. The two participants who were still on the road to recovery described themselves using adjectives such as “exhausted”, “not coping”, self-sabotaging”, and “numb”. However, at the point of the interviews, almost all had made strong steps toward or completely successful Coping and Recovery (contained in the main code below).

High Conflict. This subcode of ‘End-Fallout’ indicates a higher frequency and/or seriousness of conflicts related to the separation process. This is particularly related to the

PNT leaving and financial or custody disputes. In some cases, the conflicts appeared to have been strategic on the part of the INTs. 15 participants reported increased and/or aggressive conflict during their separation process.

Jessica realized that it took her the same amount of time to extricate herself as she had spent in her relationship. She mentioned that the high conflict felt intentional and that their relationship had become so much more tumultuous at the end. Iris stated that when they were going through their high conflict separation everything had had to go through the lawyers because of it. She believes he will do anything he can to cause ongoing conflict, including not paying child support for six months and holding her business hostage. Now however as she is willing to stand up for herself. Ava explained that her separation was “extremely messy”, with her partner issuing threats and putting the children in the middle:

I got myself a lawyer, which made him really angry. That’s when I actually started being afraid of him. Telling me the army behind him thinks I’m crazy and so on and so forth. Shortly after separating he actually yelled at me in front of our kids, and my daughter (4) went right between him and I and stretched out her arms to the sides facing him, back to me and she said, “Stop yelling at Mummy.

Vindictive Backlash. This is a subcode of ‘End-Fallout’ and happened post separation for some participants where the INT was responding to feelings of rejection, perceived slights, or challenges. It may have been a measure to continue control post-separation. The INT may have used the court system or children to engage in a form of warfare or began harassing the PNT. 21 participants reported that their partners engaged in

vindictive backlash post-separation. When the PNT initiated the breakup, all but one experienced a vindictive backlash. Table 12 explains how many participants experienced vindictiveness when either the INT or themselves initiated the breakup.

Table 12

INT Vindictive Behavior Versus the Person who Ended the Relationship- Out of Total Participants in Each Category

	INT Ended	PNT Ended	Mutual
Vindictive Behavior	5	15	1
Total Participants	12	16	1

Valerie's partner started harassing her after the separation to the point that she moved out of her parent's place and rented elsewhere to try to create more distance between herself and her partner. She purposefully didn't share her contact information. Cecilia disclosed that her partner was extremely angry over the separation, "how dare I discard him". She feels his anger increased much more after the breakup because she was no longer in service to him. Victim services and police had to become involved:

It just got worse after that, and he lived here for the two years while we were separating. Just the threats and telling our son that he would hurt any man that I dated because he could. That I was fat and ugly and haggard and saggy, and no man would ever love me the way he did, which you know, kind of the point. I hope not. It was horrible. There's just so much that happened in that couple of years until victim services and the police got involved. His true colours just jumped out. It was crazy. When the police got involved, I ended up having to put

in for a protection order because he was stalking me and harassing me. The onslaught of messages, screaming, yelling, and threats. Oh my God, it was awful. Many of the participants described how their ex-partners seemed to be purposefully trying to hurt them. In Robin's case, her partner reacted with pettiness to the breakup and did things just to spite her, for example, taking one wineglass out of the set. At one later point, he also broke into the house to steal additional things. Annie's former partner sent an email to all her friends calling her a "whore", saying that she cheated on him the whole time during the marriage and that she was the reason they had problems and split up. He refused to sign any paperwork which meant their divorce costs far exceeded what they would have been. Cecilia's partner told everyone that she had cheated and blamed her for their problems. She ended up getting a protective order because her partner was stalking her and harassing her. She described this as an onslaught of messages and screaming, yelling, and threats. She had this to say about court proceedings:

But because I couldn't afford a lawyer, and he did, because his new girlfriend paid for his lawyer, I was going to court representing myself. And I was terrified. My lowest point is when I felt like I couldn't do it anymore. My head was blowing off my shoulders. And the stress that I went through of having to stand up in court against his lawyer. Thank God for me, his lawyer saw through his bullshit too. And although he was representing him, he made things work for me. So, I was very blessed that way.

Morgan's partner also painted her to look like the cheater amongst their friends post-separation. She felt that he was very pushy, and that he is still trying to hurt her. She said,

“I don't understand what he wants from me. It's been almost a year and a half since we ended the relationship and I have him blocked on social media everywhere.” Jessica spoke about the purposefulness of her partner's actions:

Certainly, in the legal phase afterwards it felt like he was intending to do this because he knew it would hurt me. That was what it felt like. He knew that this would cause the most amount of damage— after the breakup, he said to me at one point in the kitchen, with no witnesses of course, he said “You've done this. You've caused this because you broke up with me. And you are going to suffer for this.” For saying, “This relationship is not working for me anymore.” He said, “You did this, now you have to pay the price.” And it felt like he did that for almost three and a half years after that.

Iris had this to say about her former partner's vindictiveness:

Yeah, it was nasty. He had hired a private investigator to dig up dirt on me. He was trying bankrupt me. He stole all my tax papers so he knew exactly how much money I had so he could bankrupt me. I had to live with him an extra six months because of the way the divorce works. And, if I left without the kids, I'd be abandoning them, and I could lose the children. I slept with a knife under my pillow. It was horrible. I asked all my friends and what family I had to come and help me move out because I knew he was going to not let me take anything. He had booked the elevator so I couldn't use the elevator. And then he followed me around the apartment and took things out of my bags while I was packing it. I had

my friends there so I could fight for some stuff. He wouldn't let me take nothing of the children's, not even a pair of socks, nothing.

Many of the INT partners also used their children as pawns to continue a bid for control over participants. Dawn said that her ex-partner claimed primary custody of their son due to his lower income because he pretended that he was the primary parent. Ani's partner tried to take full custody and when that was not happening, he tried to kidnap their son. Nancy pointed out that her former spouse still uses their kids as a tool to mess with her. She said that he "badmouths" her to the kids by telling them lies and that the reason he is not coming back is her fault. She says that she is faced with an onslaught of unkind messages that are never ending, that he is relentless, and she wishes that he would go somewhere else. Iris also expressed that her partner has no compunction about putting their children in the middle, "It was really bizarre, telling the kids that daddy loves them more than mommy does. Really psychologically messed up things." Dorian expressed that in their shared custody agreement his ex-partner will cut him off whenever she is, "pissed off over a perceived slight or whatever it happens to be, that's it, I'm cut off. There's no pictures, there's no communication, there's nothing about the kids. It's the bare minimum." He said that during the divorce his ex-partner had tried to take everything and wasted eight months trying to take full custody of the children. Kyla revealed that her partner would lash out whenever he felt that control was slipping away from him:

He said to my son in front of my friends, "Mummy doesn't want me to know where she lives, and I'm not allowed to go there." And so, when he would feel this control slipping away, he would do something to hurt me like that.

Mia echoed similar sentiments:

Even now, with our daughter, it's still a tool for him. Every time I want to go on vacation with her or sign up for a class or something like that, it's another way that he is able to exert control over me. I don't think he's doing it to hurt her, but not being able to make decisions about swimming lessons is really frustrating just because he's still getting pleasure out of it.

Surveilled. This is a subcode of 'End-Fallout' representing participants whose partners continued to keep tabs on them post-separation. This includes stalking behavior. 12 participants became aware of surveillance actions by their former partners, and in all but two cases, it had been the participants who had ended the relationship.

Valerie's partner kept tabs on her by going through her family members to give him information and told them that she needed to be surveilled based on false claims of physical and mental fragility. Ava found out that her partner had been tracking her car.

He said he had me watched. He actually convinced a neighbour to stalk me, so the neighbour would tell him when I got home and when I left and who came over and what time my lights went out. And so, he was really terrible. (Ani)

After he left, without telling me, he got a condo in the same building as me, which is contrary to the court order. Which said that he's not allowed to show up at my house uninvited. By getting an apartment one floor down, he's always at my house uninvited. He's always there. And if he saw people come in the building with me or anything like that, he would send me these messages that are harassing me, asking what people are doing in the family home. "Why are people

there? Isn't this inappropriate?" That sort of thing. I always felt like he was always watching me. He was always there. I could never really get away from him. And he saw no issue with this. He didn't see why it was a problem. He just wanted to retain whatever control over me that he could. (Kyla)

Morgan's partner convinced several their mutual friends to change their voice mails to his voice, she speculates, so that she would hear it whenever she called them. Mona said that her former partner texts constantly because he can't fathom why she wouldn't want him.

Even when I left, there was a no contact policy. I remember I was living with a girlfriend at the time, and he phoned 284 times over a 12-hour period, to the point where I couldn't pick up my phone to phone my lawyer, to phone the [police] because it was just constantly ringing. I think that's sort of why that period is just... I associate fear with it. (Mia)

Other participants, such as Cecilia and Brooke, reported stalking behavior:

When I finally told him that I had met somebody, he was able to find out his full name and started calling him at his work. He never spoke to him though and hung up every time my [now] husband answered. He came home and said that it was really weird, somebody keeps prank calling him. I knew who it was. (Brooke)

Trauma Response. This is a subcode of 'High Conflict', 'Vindictive Backlash', and 'Surveilled'. It was these actions and other previously mentioned behaviors perpetrated by the INT partner which led to physical and emotional reactions to triggers reminding participants about their former partners.

Robin spoke about the negative physical response that she would get in response to the continued contact from her ex:

So, he messaged me that. This happened a month ago, and I was working out at home, and my throat started to close up and I started to go into this trauma response, and so I know that he affected me deeply. It's a lot better now. That was the first time that that's happened, but I have these little trigger words. I think it's important that people understand that it's trauma. You get traumatized from that experience. In terms of treatment moving forward, I think it's really important for people to understand they need to be treated like they've had a trauma.

Megan discussed what would happen if anybody reached out who had any kind of relationship with her former partner. She would have to ignore them or would get "very triggered and have a freak out". She said that she was so triggered, that even just seeing the name of their business, the building, street, or the area where he lived would send her into the beginning stages of a panic attack and "mad anxiety" even to this day:

To this day I'm still very terrified and triggered, and I get significant emotional and trauma responses. I did not drive to that part of town. I had always lived in that area. I had to live on the other side of the city. I couldn't be anywhere near that industry [or], anything related.

Cecilia feels that this is a trauma that carries with you through life. Nancy asserted that she feels the same trauma as one would if there had been physical abuse. Brooke admitted that for a year after her relationship, anytime her phone rang and it was from her former partners area code, "my heart would skip, and I'd actually lose breath". Rita had

an occurrence when she was notified that there was a possible change to her divorce decree, and she said that a “chill ran through my spine”. She elaborated that her reaction when she saw the page was a cold clammy fear because she knew he would “throw me under a bus to save a nickel”, so she was horrified. Luckily, it turned out that her ex was just getting remarried. Morgan has been having a lot of flashbacks. She thinks the relationship was so traumatizing that it took her six months after the breakup to even recall certain memories of what had happened. She said that she is still very trauma respondent and not healed completely from it.

A couple of the participants discussed having ongoing nightmares relating to their relationships. Robin talked about traumatic dreams she had been having about her partner, and Ava had this to say:

I still get nightmares to this day. Just last week I woke up from a nightmare. I was in our former townhouse together, and there was a hit man that he sent after me. And I was running away from the hit man that he sent after me.

Years later, Jessica had a moment where she accidentally encountered her ex on a plane:

I was shaking in my seat that whole flight. There was a point in the flight where the guy next to me must have been like, “What the hell is wrong with you?” I was sweating, and I was opening and closing my book and not sure what to do. He’d never physically threatened me. There was never any physical abuse. It was interesting how my mind went there, I was afraid of it because of how twisted things got, especially towards the end. But the amount of fear that I had of running into him, of seeing him and even that moment on the plane.

Some of the participants who shared children with their INT partners reported active, ongoing trauma, especially as it relates to INT manipulation tactics and bids for control. However, they also described an ability to better cope due to their increased insights about the relationship and a sense of distance from it.

In short, increasing conflict occurred in almost all the dyads, and the end-points were often characterized by backlash and amplified bids for control from INTs in response to the breakups, especially when it was initiated by PNTs. The actions of the INTs from both the relationship events and the aftermath sometimes led to ongoing trauma responses for participants.

Coping and Recovery

This main code indicates strategies and subconscious actions that participants may have been engaging with even before the end of their relationships to recover their sense of self and to deal with the difficult facets of the relationship. At times, this recovery may have been a catalyst for the termination of the relationship. Participants at some point began to choose themselves first and to see possibilities outside of the relationship. In certain of the relationships, this exhibited as a shift of the power balance becoming closer center. Because this code proved to be so large, it was broken down into smaller subcodes which explain the bulk of the information. Participants were in a different places in their journeys to recovery, however, two participants indicated that they were not yet on a healing road. “I have a tattoo of a bird, stitching a broken heart. It’s bent but not broken. So, realizing that I’m not broken, I’m not damaged.” (Ruby)

Self-Focus. This subcode of ‘Coping and Recovery’ represents participants beginning once again to take time and space for themselves to focus on personal wellbeing. 13 participants spoke about shifting the focus back to themselves.

Robin feels that healing herself and knowing her worth is the antidote to avoiding relationships with another INT, “if I don’t build skills and resiliency and I don’t process it, I’m at risk to be revictimized in a different way, or in the same way.” Some participants spoke about the need to process what had happened and to spend some time for themselves. Megan said that she laid in bed for about a month just processing, crying, and drowning herself in Netflix. Then one day decided she just needed to get outside. She also decided to “honor” herself and “believe” in herself, part of which was not taking her prescription for antidepressants. She was “busy processing and just needed space to do that”. Dustin found that he was able to sit with himself and review the 1 1/2 years that he “spent in abuse”, and what the reasons were as to why he “kept saying yes to everything that was going on over there”. Vanessa began to allow certain things back in again, such as the job she loves, but still struggled with the pain. “And I just had this overwhelming sense that I needed to get quiet. And I needed to spend time with myself and really, really face some of these dark things.”

The repossession of the sense of self was the most commonly indicated healing process for participants. For instance, post-separation, Madeline specified that she reclaimed her spaces and wants back for herself, such as going to the gym, which she had avoided due to her partner’s distaste. Similarly, Wendy gradually began to rediscover what she likes and what she wants to do. The slow process has allowed her to feel

authentic in this rediscovery and she no longer feels “flat” as she once did. Morgan pointed out that this progression has allowed everything in her life to come back into “focus” again. For Ruby, this was a measured process:

It was just gradual with everything I did, like joining Jazzercise, joining a choir, and getting reacquainted with some of the friends that I had still kept in touch with, but actually wanting to spend time physically with them. Everything that I did felt like armour that I was putting on. I was insulating myself and showing myself up. I didn't bemoan everything that happened. I wasn't going around feeling like this victim. Yes, people knew the story and they did feel obviously bad for me that I had been taken advantage of. I didn't go around using that.

Dorian is committed to spending time on the things that he can control (for example, not engaging with his ex), and what he truly cares about, such as self-improvement:

It's hard and I'm not nailing it, but really trying to look inward, take responsibility for my stuff, know that I can't help her, I can't change her and there's no amount of fighting or whatever that's going to make her see. So, I'm wasting my time. I'd rather just focus on the things that I can control, and that's me and that's the happiness that I can provide the kids. That's what care about.

Self-Love. This is a subcode of ‘Self-Focus’ which represents participants getting back in touch with the self that they admire and love. It is about recognizing personal strength, resilience, and worth, and gaining confidence and increased self-respect. 18 participants indicated that they were getting in touch with the self that they love as part of their healing.

The main tools that that participants implemented to bring self-love into their worlds were self-validation, recognizing that what they had been made to feel badly about was in fact a strength not a weakness, and giving themselves permission to be themselves and have fun again. Una now admires her openness and caring:

I think although it has been the thing that hurt me in that relationship, the fact that I have a really big and open heart. I've come to see that as a strength, not just a weakness. As long as I have boundaries around it, which are very important, that's actually one of my best qualities.

Megan and Mona are refusing to blame themselves for being trapped into their relationships and trying to forgive themselves. Nancy now recognizes that she can take care of herself, but she is determined to surround herself with people who will encourage her and who she can trust to have her back. Elise has chosen to live "emotionally safely":

What I do now is I imagine myself in a bull's-eye. I'm at the centre of the bull's-eye, and everybody in my life is on a little pin with an elastic band that can go in and out of that centre. In the centre are only the people that feel right at that time. If a friendship starts to feel strained when it's too close, I just say, okay, well, that relationship belongs out here on this level because it's not working for in here. And in my intimate relationship with this guy, what I do now is when I feel uncomfortable with him in any way, I put him further away. I don't cut ties because cutting ties is too drastic.

Tara refused to force herself to be someone she is not anymore:

I sort of just validate who I am “Yeah, that’s who I am”, and “That’s okay to be quieter and to be a deep thinker rather than jumping out all the time,” that “It’s okay”. I don’t have to force myself to do those things if I don’t want to do them. Dustin has been affirming of himself in that he does not deserve abuse, and he is learning to respect himself and is reconnecting with himself and his inner child. He believes that self-love is an important thing to recover. Cecilia stated that she has made herself feel very proud. She is now allowing herself to “come forward”, to be herself, and to love herself. She is also electing to forgive herself for the choices she made that were detrimental to her health and mental health:

I knew that when the time came, I was ready to move on, that I was worthy, I was beautiful, and I was going to be fine. That people saw me for more than just an object. I wasn’t ugly, haggard, old, and saggy like he was trying to make me believe. That helped me kind of keep my strength to go forward with the divorce.

Robin is now willing to admire that she ended up OK, despite the trauma. People have advised her to pull back from giving, but she sees this as an important piece of her identity and admires it. Morgan discussed that she has come to realize that most of what people were correcting about her did not need any correcting. That she was exhibiting good, healthy, individual signs, and that people just kept “badgering at it”. Now she is trying to be very kind to herself and allowing herself space. She is learning to set realistic expectations and goals for herself and to let herself know that she’s “done enough, that it’s good enough”. Madeline is now allowing herself to put her first. She has taken the room to feel free, and feels like she can breathe again, do the things that she wants to do,

and be herself again. Claire is now allowing herself to share in happiness and joy.

Vanessa is now getting in touch with what she likes and is being gracious with herself:

I realize I was carrying this stress. So, I feel like I'm allowing myself permission to accept what's happened to me and giving myself permission to be good at stuff again. I'm very introspective and very analytical as a person, and I'm accepting that is a good thing. But I'm trying to accept not to be so hard on myself. I'm giving myself permission to have fun again and accept that it's okay. I'm certainly very gracious with everybody else. I'm trying to learn to be gracious with myself. If somebody else came to me with what I was saying, I would have endless support for them to go out and give themselves permission to do and be and to have everything they want to. I would be, like, "It's okay to be nice to yourself." Be nice to yourself. I always tell people that.

Self-Care. This subcode of 'Self-Focus' indicates the activities that 15 participants spoke about engaging in to reprioritize themselves and to return to health. See Table 13 for a summary of activities mentioned by the number of participants (P) specifically in relation to self-care. This does not include other wellness and recovery activities.

Table 13*Self-Care Coping Strategies*

Strategy	P	Examples	Benefits
Exercise	6	gym, spin class, walking	Outlet, community, routine, feeling in great shape
Community	6	Mom's groups, club, mall, gym	Making friends, independence, coming back to the self
Meditation	4		Connecting to self/self examination, let the world in, with negative self-talk, & healing
Hobbies	4	singing (choir)	Time for self
Journalling	3		Finding the self, let the world in
General Self-Care	2		Focus on self
Yoga	2		Finding the self, let the world in
Praying	2		Healing
Nature/Outside	2		Getting around humans
Meaningful Work	2		Path back to self, independence
Volunteering	1		
Counselling	1		Helped with negative self-talk

On the other hand, Mona says that she knows that she needs to do self care but as of the time of the interview lacked the energy to do so.

Therapy. This subcode of ‘Self-Focus’ indicates participants seeking therapy to help make sense of the relationship and/or to recover and cope with the events of the relationship. This might have meant getting back in touch with one’s feelings and sense of self-worth or self-esteem. Therapy was an often-mentioned resource, with at least 25 participants using it as a resource for recovery.

Couples therapy aside, most participants found therapy to be helpful quite at various points in their relationship and in the aftermath. It was used primarily as a great source of support, aid in making sense of the relationship, and validation. Madeline's

partner had required her to go to therapy because he said that's what it would take for them to save the marriage, however, she ended up sticking with it for herself. Her partner was upset that she continued because it seemed to be offering a source of support and was a stabilizing factor that gave her focus outside of the relationship. She cited it as important for her recovery because she could rely on and relate to her therapist. This was mainly because her therapist could handle hearing everything about her past, which helped her to build trust that she did not formerly have for that field. Una's therapist pointed out to her that when she travelled away from her partner, she seemed to come back as herself. She engaged in regular therapy, and stated that her therapist gave her tough love, telling her that the relationship was not going to “end” her. Rita confessed to her therapist that she kept messing up but recognized that she's imperfect and she can take responsibility for her own “stuff”. She can see how she now has a different perspective on relationships. Years of therapy have allowed her to slowly rebuild her life, and she feels that currently she has a great life. She's very proud of the years of therapy, work that she has done, and credits her therapist with helping her to put herself “back together”. In Morgan's case, therapy helped her to begin to detach to the point of walking out on her relationship. She said that when she first saw her counselor one of her thoughts was, “Jesus where do I turn off this tap? What do I do to not be this emotional? To not be this person?” After her breakup, her therapist mentioned narcissism and when she started reading, it helped to keep her from returning to the relationship. Dustin’s counsellor became a crucial advocate, “The thing is that my only support was my therapist.” he said that his therapist helped to identify his partner's anger, her façade, manipulations, and

lying. He confessed that he was exhausted and didn't feel like his self anymore, so his therapist helped him to strive for positivity, which was a valuable perspective. The therapist also helped him to no longer cover up for his partner and to not take on responsibility for her.

Kyla mentioned that counseling helped her to understand her experience of the relationship more fully. Therapy helped Claire with awareness and to distance herself mentally. Cecilia says that now that she has done some therapy, she knows a lot more now about herself and narcissistic abuse. She said that she was hanging on to whatever relationship she could even though it was toxic because it was all that she had. Nancy is using what she learned in therapy to transfer to her kids because they still have to deal with a narcissistic parent. Jessica's counsellor described the relationship like always having the rug pulled out from underneath her and that she never quite knew when it was going to get pulled. When she was thinking, "OK things are OK now and it's going pretty well, I can relax a bit", suddenly, her partner would do something that destabilized her. Her therapist encouraged looking back on her relationship history for information:

After the relationship ended, I was in counselling for a long time, "You should have looked at the history and have a look and see when it first started to happen, so you can pay attention." And pay better attention the next time, as those things happen. And I kind of avoided doing that.

Robin suggested therapy helped to accept the abusiveness of the relationship, to make sense of it, and to validate her perspective, such as that what was happening in the

relationship was not OK or normal, and that she was not alone in feeling that. Similarly, therapy helped Ani to view the problematic relationship objectively:

I think being validated was very helpful. I think being affirmed was very helpful.

I think someone that didn't know me and didn't know him and wasn't part of our friend group, didn't have any attachment to us, for someone outside of that to say, "Yeah, that's fucked up," like "How he was treating you is not okay. That is messed up," that was helpful.

Counselling also assisted in learning about boundaries and how not to give too much to others. A highly respected psychiatrist that Tara worked with gave her the first inkling that she was not perceiving the situation incorrectly. She felt that he started her on the path to continue to see therapists, however, she admits that she probably drove them "nuts" because everything they would say she would say back, "well he's actually a really nice guy". Her therapist helped her to see that she was not responsible for the main issues of the relationship and was a great help for recovery. Ava considered her therapist to be of great support because she had not previously confided to anyone. She learned in therapy about the connection between her family of origin, marriage, codependency, and narcissism. Therapy helped her realize that she had a right to her feelings:

The moment I realized what I learned was the day my therapist gave me a list of my personal bill of rights, in which one of them was, "I have a right to my feelings. I have the right to my thoughts." And just everything on that list, that's when I realized just how suppressed I had been. I remember posting my personal bill of rights on the refrigerator. I remember him laughing at me for doing that.

Eleanor elaborated that CBT techniques helped rationalize what her disturbing thoughts were about. Her therapist talked about a technique that resonated strongly:

So, he had this technique called the “downward arrow”. “Okay, say you drove your car off the road. Why would that be good?” And so, you’re supposed to write down the thought. I wrote down the thought, “Drive my car off the road.” Okay, what’s next? Driving my car off the road. Why would that be good? And I was like, “Oh, okay.” And first, you’re thinking there’s nothing good about it as soon as he asked the question, I found myself writing the answer. “It would be good because I would get in a car accident.” Okay, why would that be good? “That would be good because I would get hurt.” Okay, why would that be good? “That would be good because the ambulance would come, and I would be hurt enough that they would take me to the hospital. And I would go to the hospital.” “Okay, why would that be good?” “Well, I would be all like bruised and bleeding and hooked up to machines.” Okay, why would that be good? “Because my husband would come. And he would see me like that.” Okay, why would that be good? “He’d have empathy for me.” And then, the tears started and then I started laughing through the tears. It was one of those like embarrassing – I’m laughing and crying at the same time because I’m like, “Are you going to have empathy for me? You idiot, he would sit beside me complaining about how much more work he had to do and make me feel hurt for him.”

Normally we relate to each other through compassion and empathy and understanding. The way [INTs] relate to people is through the drama triangle. So,

he drew a triangle. On the top, he put a “V” in the circle and on the other side, he put a “P” and then, in the other circle he put an “R”. And he said, “So, this is what happens.” He said, “There’s only three roles in the drama triangle.” And he said, “There’s persecutor, victim and rescuer.”

She discussed how the INT will tell you that they are always the victim, and will tell you that you are the persecutor, however, the PNT always gets “sucked into the rescuer role”.

Elise had a mixed experience with therapy. A therapist that she had been seeing at the beginning of her relationship had advised her not to marry her partner due to sexual concerns that she had about her partner. She often felt blamed for the issues, so while she was busy doing things like mindfulness work, the concept of her partner’s issues did not emerge for a long time, and only after seeing several professionals. Elise finally saw a therapist who spoke with her about narcissism and emotional abuse, and she began to realize that she was not the person who was causing the bulk of the issues. Her therapist helped her to put steps in place to leave her relationship. Wendy has considered that had she not stopped seeing her therapist around the time she began her relationship, it might have been helpful to her to extricate herself differently. Megan confessed that she had lied to her therapist about the source of her problems and blamed things on her parents because the truth was too hard to face.

Medication. This is a subcode of “Therapy”. Medication helped five participants to recover from anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns that began during the relationship or were aggravated by it.

Diana felt that medication was imperative” because she had gotten to a “very dark place”. After her relationship ended, Rita said, “I went on antidepressants for a while. Although, for me, it’s certainly more – it was definitely mixed depression and anxiety.” Vanessa confirmed that medication “helped enormously”. A couple of the participants were diagnosed with, and began to take medication for ADHD, which Madeline believes may have helped her with her goals for ending her relationship.

Research. This is a subcode of ‘Self Focus’ and indicates efforts of at least 18 participants to research and educate themselves around issues in their relationships, their partner’s behaviors, trauma, and narcissism to help them makes sense of what was happened and to recover. This often was helpful in the healing process and to realize that they were not at fault for all the problems of the relationship.

Many of the participants had been given research recommendations by their therapists into the nature of narcissism and other related concerns, the internet and books being the most common sources. Some were continuing ongoing research well after. For several participants, it was a revelation to read about the classic signs of narcissism and recognizing patterns of behaviors in their own relationships. Brooke identified that her partner was “pretty bang on” in terms of narcissistic criteria. Ava and Morgan also found that information about codependency was also very helpful and Megan dove into research around trauma. Rita began to realize and accept that her partner fit the bill for a vulnerable or fragile subtype of narcissist. Finding an article around the vulnerable subtype changed everything for her. It also helped her to read about narcissistic rage to

make sense of her partner's behavior. She felt that she made a mistake in “talking too much” with her partner and “not taking action”.

Dorian joked that he felt like an expert in NPD. He realized that he had “zero boundaries” and was a “people pleaser”. He learned how that connected to NPD in relationships. He said that reading this information helped to validate his feelings and that he was educating himself so he could work on his mistakes. This required him to dive into the concept of vulnerability and felt that that was a lightbulb moment for him. “You're stripping down your stuff to the core, putting it all out there, that's courage, man. That's courage”. Eleanor found that educating herself on narcissistic behaviors helped her to see her own caregiving behaviors. Her research also helped her to find ideas on how to conceptualize events that had happened within a Christian community framework. Tara was connected to the Gamblers Anonymous community and she found it exceedingly helpful to learn the strategies that other people were using with their spouses because they often applied to her partner's narcissism as well.

A few participants discussed how their research helped them in court because of their highly conflictual situation. Learning about narcissism allowed them to understand their partner's behaviors and to certain extent, to mitigate it. Iris said that combined with her newfound knowledge of narcissism and Family Law, she was able to self represent when there was no money to hire a lawyer. She pointed out that as a middle-class person, she was not eligible for Legal Aid, yet could not afford to hire someone.

Labelling. This is a subcode of research and represents language used to describe the experience of being with an INT partner. For at least 12 participants, being able to

label narcissism and the associated behaviors was the key to a sense of understanding the relationship, and to absolve themselves from a great deal of the unfair burden of responsibility that they had been carrying for problems in the relationship.

Some participants felt they gained a stronger sense of understanding of the events of their relationships from being able to label the narcissistic behaviors and to comprehend what they had been through. Ava found that being able to label her partner's behaviors as narcissistic was "eye opening". Eleanor found the concept of the marriage being a "dance" as unhelpful, however she read Gabor Maté 's book, "When the Body Says No" and realized that there were abusive behaviors in her relationship:

As soon as I had the word "abuse" it was like "wait a second, this is not OK. You can't do this to somebody and have this be OK". So, as soon as I realized that this was not behavior that was just a dance, or behavior that was going to change because I spoke in a different way. Because it's the way you speak to me, it's the way you look at me, it's the way you don't acknowledge me. We need to support people doing that when they don't quite have a language for why.

She said she began to grasp what is involved with a narcissistic relationship and that being able to label the emotional abuse gave her a language to express and to see what was going on. She spoke about another book that was most helpful to her called "Stop Caretaking the Borderline or Narcissist" (Margalis Fjelstad) which informed her about the meanings of gas lighting, flying monkey, and love bombing:

She gave me a language to express and see what was going on. There needs to be an institute for helping to put a language to this type of abuse. If you have a level

of language for it, then suddenly it makes sense. We need language and understanding using empathy and compassion and we need ways to identify what the confusion means and to be able to walk away when feeling these feelings.

People need support to identify and walk away and the reasons to do so.

Labelling helped some to put down the burden of shame and responsibility for problems by realising that narcissistic behaviors and outcomes were not their fault.

Examining Beliefs. This subcode of ‘Self-Focus represents a reexamination and challenging of PNT relationships beliefs, beliefs about the self, and their roles in life and partnership. This may include a reframing of understanding and giving oneself permission to come first. 16 participants reported reviewing their belief systems.

If there’s anything I can tell anybody going through it is really make the effort to look inward. It’s hard and it sucks. That’s the part for me, wanting to really work on me to make changes. You look at the shit that’s in there and how. (Dorian)

For Ani, it was important to her to examine her traditional beliefs around marriage, including the ones that she grew up with. Dustin believed that you covered up for your partner and you make things work; that was just a responsibility that you took on, which is something he is now reexamining. Wendy pointed out that the pandemic has given her a place to stop and reflect and, “come back to myself and to not feel anxious”. Rita now evaluates, “Am I reasonable, is this accurate?” regarding her experiences of the relationship. Vanessa explained that she has always felt like everything is her fault and she is still struggling to work that out in her own mind right now. She is doing her best to get in touch with what she truly feels and to sort out the “messed up” feelings she has

from the relationship. She said that she is seeing “glimmers of giving [herself] permission to be OK and at least facing why she hasn't already allowed herself that permission”. She said that she is examining hard truths about the way she has been “living life and giving all of [her] permission to live to somebody else”:

I would never wish that on anybody else, so why would I wish that on myself? I don't know these answers. But I'm facing them. I've allowed this kind of thing to go on in a lot of other places. And I've had some unfortunate wake up calls in the last six months in particular with some other behavior like this in other places.

Eleanor explained that the process of trying to figure out her partner's behavior, letting go of the relationship, and trusting her instincts has been “a profoundly beautiful experience at this point because I don't know I would have found healing any other way. I think I was so wired to just self sacrifice”. Tara began to check in with her feelings of responsibility, guilt, and to look inward, “you got to figure out who you are”.

That's why it took me so long to get out of the relationship. Because even though I started to sense that something was wrong, I needed to make sure every step of the way that it was safe to do it. I suspected I'd eventually leave the marriage 12 years prior to doing so but had a child and a strong moral code which demanded that I identify and clear up my contribution to unhealthy dynamics before casting blame elsewhere. (Elise)

Cecilia realized that she had never allowed herself to come forward. She emphasized the importance of reminding oneself “that there is a healthy life out there”:

Things I would tell myself are, “Just be you. Be the best you, you can be and love yourself. It's hard to love yourself but it's hard to forgive yourself for the things that you choose to do that are detrimental to your health and your mental health.”

Valerie found that her newly acquired panic attacks prompted questions about her relationship. “Why did I continue to be in that relationship? Why would I subject myself to this type of treatment?” She said, “If you feel that something is wrong, don't ignore those feelings. See if you can just isolate yourself, investigate these feelings.”:

Would knowing about narcissism help to make different decisions? How could I have prevented myself from being in a relationship like that? If I knew those signs, would I have looked for that. Would I have made a very different decision?

Brooke also began to do internal work after and wondered how she could have stayed:

For a lot of reasons, not just the relationship and the yearning of the “what if”.

That relationship itself has made me do a lot of my own internal work. What made me stay? How powerful one human being can be over another. And when I started to regain my strength, I think you have to do internal work. It makes you realize what's important to you, who you are as a person, what you have to give, and that you're not willing to settle for less. Sometimes that means being with somebody who is right for you as opposed to being with somebody who is exciting and is going to cause heartache down the road.

Megan described how post-separation the picture of the relationship would come “clear and then it would become unclear, and then something might click”. She said once it would click, little bit by little bit, it was like she couldn't turn back. She began to

challenge her partner's "grandiose" image of the relationship and life. "I can go back, and he doesn't rob me of where I can live. And who is he to tell me that kind of stuff? I can't give him that kind of power." Dawn also realised she had developed some new outlooks:

Realist, probably more cynical about romance. Definitely recognize "perfect" doesn't exist, but also, I think more tolerant of the not perfect. I don't know that it's made me scared or sensitive like it did with [partner's gf#3] and even potentially [partner's gf#1]. For whatever reason, that was really hard on them, discovering that they were with a monster. After I processed it, I think it's just made me really happy I lost that 200 lbs [referring to her ex].

The reexamination process brought up the question for Ruby who was wondering if anything in the relationship was real and if what her partner did and said was sincere:

Sometimes when I think about my 12 years, was anything real? Was I just sucked into his version of fantasy? I question that a lot. Did I even know what it meant to love someone? Did he actually love me? I don't know the answer to that.

Acceptance. This is a subcode of 'Examining Beliefs' indicating an acceptance that INT behaviors were not ok, and a recognition that the INT will likely never fully understand, admit to their role, or acknowledge responsibility for their treatment of participants. 15 participants indicated acceptance in this vein.

One of the things that Cecilia said she had to accept was a difference in how she had felt about her partner and relationship versus how she now imagines her partner did: f

That was the hardest part for me in healing is understanding that my marriage wasn't real. It was real to me, but it wasn't to him. Feelings that I had were not

reciprocated. And, when you spend 20 years with someone, when you realize that wow, my marriage was a sham. That's a hard thing to work through and accept. Accepting that abuse happened in the relationship was something that many of the participants had struggled with. Robin suggested that the biggest recovery tool for her was this acceptance, that it was not OK, and that it was not her fault. She found that she needed to talk a lot about relationship to help her process and to reach that point. Kyla also accepted that her partner had abused her, "but not in a way that leaves bruises".

I guess I didn't realize he was a narcissist. But it came to light that he was abusive in some ways. I wrote a letter to him explaining how his behaviour was abusive and that I didn't think that abuse was a dirty word. It was just using something for something that it's not. That he was using me as an emotional clearing house. He felt something bad and then it became about me. [When a therapist labelled narcissism] The puzzle pieces started to fall because I was, like, "What? How is it even possible?" But it's having somebody on the outside (not just a friend) recognize it and say, hey wait a minute, it's not just you. (Elise)

Tara indicated that this acceptance only occurred for her once she was able to get some distance from the relationship and her partner. For Eleanor, it was a realization that her partner could never reciprocate empathy and that her partner's behaviors were abusive. Ani spoke about one of her major moments of acceptance, when her partner acted like he had never heard her speak of the problems:

I remember feeling a sense of shock, "We've talked about these problems. I told you that I'm going to leave you if you don't do these things and we don't address

these problems.” I remember that being the most vivid thing as I watched... it’s almost like I was a second party to what I was seeing and I could see him trying to manipulate me in that moment, trying to blame me and make it my fault, as if I was the one who had failed at making sure that he had been successful in our marriage. I remember connecting the dots and going, “Oh, this is what’s been happening the whole time,” as I looked backwards over all the conversations we had.

Dorian was able to accept the idea of letting go because he now understood enough about narcissism, and that there had been psychological abuse to realise that he had done everything possible, “I did everything I could.’ I really feel like I gave 150%.” Mia’s acceptance came from “realizing there is no excuse for this behavior”.

Positive Outlook. This is a subcode of ‘Self-Focus’ and represents moments when at least 13 participants decided to take away learning, value, and ideas for positivity from their experiences which ultimately helped in coping or healing.

Jessica has found a sense of positivity and optimism from having to make difficult decisions in her relationship and after. Robin feels that she can move on in a healthy way despite the relationship:

It is important to me that this experience is something that I identify with, because it has changed me, I think, for the better. It took awhile to get there, and it wasn’t an easy journey, but I think that it’s changed my identity.

Dorian has decided that life is too short to live in the negative and Dustin is enthusiastic about doing work on himself, “I’ve learned that I’m one of those people who is willing to work on myself all the time and whatever needs to be done, I am willing to do it.”

Morgan has also been working on herself, listening to positive thinking podcasts, and feels that the relationship has helped to teach her to live more in the moment:

I am pretty hopeful. I see nothing there but the good thing that's come out of this has been the need to live in the moment. I have been able to do a lot of – moving out from my parents is very difficult for me. That was a very, very not something I would do. The previous version of me wouldn't even approve.

Ava is intent on counting her blessings and Ruby is determined not to feel like a victim and to take some value from the experience. Wendy said, "My memory of him is largely positive, despite all the negatives that happened. My theory is that maybe it's still a lingering effect of the idealization and imbalance in self worth that I felt with him."

Future Planning. This is a subcode of 'Positive Outlook' and represents participants making future plans that do not include the INT, being excited and open to new opportunities that may come along and moving forward with life. 14 participants kept a view to the future to assist in healing.

For Jessica, future planning was motivated by a desire to move on quickly from her relationship. Diana expressed that she is now done with grief and anger and can feel herself coming back again.

I think for so long it was living in that literal day-to-day fight, flight, or freeze sort of thing. Then with my daughter, it was basically just survival mode – getting us through the days, getting myself back to work after my mat leave ended. My focus was 100% on her and moving forward with our life. (Mia)

Some set goals for themselves that they felt they had to meet. Three months after her break up, Megan, for example, applied for a job to get herself back into the workforce after having to let go of her business along with her ex. She identified that she needed to create a different experience for herself going forward that she could be proud of. Just imagining a future helped Robin to recover. “Eventually, “Okay, the talking is done. What are we changing now?” In regards to my life; Moving on. What do I want in the future? And then, I started dreaming about my future.” (Dustin)

I want to live life. I can do better. I can be better. And I was better, but I want to be a better version of myself that I look back on from 6-7 years ago. I don't miss her or miss this marriage or the old house or anything at all. For me, there's nothing back there anymore. Everything is forward. (Dorian)

While Morgan is having difficulty imagining the future and what it could look like, she says that she is “hopeful”. She has decided to leave behind the idea of blame and to recognize that, “I have the rest of my life” and will spend time working towards feeling back in control.

Routine. This is a subcode of ‘Self-Focus’ and indicates that participants have returned to or created a new routine for themselves to assist in healing and recovery. Often times this is a refocus back to the needs of the self. Four participants listed this as a coping strategy.

It was very difficult – I'm a routine junky. I came up with a routine of little things that helped me even get out of bed in the morning. Some of the things that have really helped have been journaling first thing before I do anything else. And then,

I do some gentle movement. It's typically like a short yoga practice or something like that. And then, meditation. As things have been getting a bit easier in my life, that whole routine has sometimes fallen by the wayside but in general, it's still part of my way that I keep myself balanced. I guess it's more centering of myself before I open myself to the world or before I open my curtains, I need that time to again find myself before I let the world in. (Jessica)

Morgan mentioned that her schedule is important but that she had let it go during the relationship because she has the propensity to be a giver at the expense to herself:

My schedule is off track. I am definitely still very trauma respondent. I'm not healed by any expense of it. The one thing that I have to work on now is my schedule. Realizing that everything was thrown out of whack. I just don't want to keep blaming what happened for the rest of my life. I have the rest of my life. Trying to bring it back under control.

Asserting boundaries. This is a subcode of 'Self-Focus' and indicates that PNTs have begun establishing healthy boundaries, are recognizing when they are breached, and are instigating appropriate consequences for their relationships. 21 participants reported reviewing and implementing new ways of setting boundaries.

Dawn says that she is still accommodating and nice but that she is now willing to assert her boundaries. Claire realises that she can be strong without sacrifice, and will say no to people, and refuses to carry other people's stuff. She gave an example of a rule for herself, "if it feels too good to be true, it probably is. If it's too much charm, too much kind of self-aggrandizement." Valerie identified that she is learning about boundary

setting and about her own voice. She is more comfortable to use her voice and more responsible for her own decisions by not deferring to others. Now she knows she would never put up with her partner's behavior again and his focus on her body. She said that no one else is allowed to have that kind of control, and she doesn't ever think it's OK for anyone to call her a "bitch" or to tell her what weight she should be. Dorian has learned that in being a helper, it's important that he deal with "other people's stuff without taking it on". He believes that for him, setting boundaries is the "be all and all" as he feels he was a pushover in the past. He pointed out that, "setting the boundaries are easy. It's enforcing the boundaries that take the work, because that's where you really risk alienating yourself from whatever relationship you have with that person or group of people." Now he says he would leave if he was ever spoken to the way that his partner did. Rita pointed out that she would not tolerate her partner's behavior today. She is spending time actively managing her boundaries and being deliberate about her choices. She is now willing to tell an abuser to "fuck off". She gave an example of unacceptable behavior at a recent job that she was willing to leave in favor of asserting her boundaries.

A couple of the participants spoke about contact they have with their ex-partners and the importance of having coping strategies for themselves and of teaching their children to do likewise. Mia has ongoing contact as a co-parent:

It's hard to create those boundaries that you need to create when you still have to contact them three or four times a week. So, I usually just ignore it to the amount that's possible. But it's that reminding him, "We can't talk on the phone. We can't talk by text," and that's all legally binding. Those boundaries are good.

Megan has asserted that her partner doesn't get to rob her of what area she can live in. She refuses to give him that kind of power. She describes running into him and how she was able to maintain her boundaries:

And I faked it in the moment. I was, like, oh yeah, and then I just walked out, and I was, like, “no”. And it was such a firm no. And I just never followed up. I truthfully thought to myself, before that, if he tries even one thing... I felt like I wouldn't be strong enough to stay away.

She says that she is now protective about herself, careful about who she spends her time with, and she who she gives her energy to. She asks herself, “what are noncompromisable things for me?” It is hard for her to do still, and she thinks that there is a lot of ongoing processes happening in the back of her head.

In a lot of ways, I feel like when people don't approve, I don't care because I wouldn't even have approved this yesterday and it doesn't matter what you think of me, whether you think of me positively, negatively, whatever. It is what it is. And I'm not as scared to lose people, I think. Over time, it's gotten better. I'm like, “Okay, if you stay, you stay. If you don't, then there's the door.” (Morgan)

Participants are much more careful now when entering new relationships with co-workers, friends, and intimates. Eleanor will now tell someone if she dislikes the way that a situation is handled. She trusts her feelings when she's hurt or angry, and she says that, “the person can either deal with that, as I offer it a gift, or they can reject that. And that's OK. If they reject it, then I no longer want the relationship.” Iris says that she tends to stand up for herself a little bit more, especially when she is in contact with her former

partner. She always wanted to keep the peace but no longer makes that a priority. Elise is now willing to take a risk and is being honest about her feelings. She has stopped giving in and says, “Keep safe emotional distance until you’re 100%.”

Wendy suggested that she hadn't really had barriers between herself and other people in a romantic sense. She describes herself as a bit more cautious about going forward and is just keeping more space and distance. Mia described:

I think I’m a lot more careful about choosing my relationships, and I’m frighteningly good at identifying things in those relationships that I don’t like and communicating them, to a point where it’s probably a bit annoying, but I think I need that. I think I definitely need that. So, that’s changed.

Ani maintains that she has good, healthy boundaries now and that she considers herself to be “bold, honest, and brave”, and she has no problem telling people “exactly how it is”. However, she will always carry a fear of being in a committed relationship where she might start to lose herself. She is acutely aware that she has some unnecessary boundaries up as well. Diana maintains that now she stands up for herself, sometimes too much and, Ruby stated that she is become more guarded, perhaps more than is healthy.

Release. This is a subcode of ‘Self-Focus’ and demonstrates that participants have progressed to a safe enough place to release the emotions related to the relationship through talking, crying and otherwise purging events. This may mean putting down the emotional burdens from the relationship as a way of coping and moving forward. 12 participants described this concept as part of their recovery journey.

Una decided to finally give herself permission not to get things “right” all the time. Cecilia began to realize that the trouble her partner created everywhere he went was no longer her problem, including “pulling the wool over friend's eyes”. “Stan used to call it, “the journey that we took together.” It was his journey. His bullshit.”

There was a lot of release in my divorce. I think saying, “I want a divorce from you” was the thing that allowed me to have the most... a moment of release. I think it was the moment I said, “I’m done with you now”. That I was just... I can’t even describe the amount of... the pressure that fell off of me in that moment, and the release that I felt, and the sense of calmness that came. (Ani)

Robin said that venting to friends helped her to process. Claire would just drive and scream in her car to release the pent-up emotions. Dorian purposefully does not bottle-up his feelings now, and is no longer afraid to be vulnerable anymore, which he feels takes more courage than holding back. Diana performed a full moon ritual and smashed the gifts that her partner had given her. She said that she was crying all the time and that books helped her to heal. She said she went through a “good angry phase”:

And opening-up to people about it. Because I hid it... my sadness for a very long time from everybody. And during COVID I realized that I can’t keep wearing that mask anymore. The mask isn’t working. Because I used to be really good at putting on a front at family gatherings and stuff. And then all of a sudden... I couldn’t put... the mask wouldn’t go on anymore.

Madeline said that once the relationship was over, she released everything that was pent up by crying continuously. She finally felt that she could get her feelings out again.

Megan said that she laid in bed for about a month crying and processing.

Proof. This is a subcode of ‘Self-Focus’ indicating the use of journaling, documenting, emails, texts, and recordings that allow the PNT to remember or prove events of the relationship, especially as covert abuse is hard to figure out. This may have helped to confirm instincts, or was also used in court. Nine participants reported using proof in their healing process.

Sophia said that it was important for her to have found evidence of her partner’s cheating, “she was in my house the whole time. I needed to find out because if I didn’t find out, then I would’ve continued to blame myself.” Elise felt that tracking everything was important because writing it down helped to see that it wasn’t all her. She started writing down the criticisms and the comments, “It allowed me to start to see that it wasn’t just me. That it was a pattern. I didn’t feel it, but it was a pattern.” Valerie kept a journal to track her thoughts, feelings, and events of what was happening in the relationship. When she looked back at the journal entries, she realized that she had all these feelings and thoughts that she didn’t want to acknowledge.

Eleanor started to refuse to speak to her partner unless she was in front of witnesses. She did this so that when he gaslighted her she now had people who could back up her experience. Cecilia mentioned her instincts told her to check her partner’s phone. She was able to show this proof to other people who then understood a little bit about what she was going through. Mona also looked on her partner’s device and found

“essays of love letters”. Dustin finally had proof of his partner's actions in the form of voicemails that he could let others who didn't believe him listen to.

Dorian set up a video camera to capture proof of his partner “trashing” his room. he also started making notes and recordings of conversations as they were happening to talk to his partner. These things would be handy if they ended up in court because he felt that no one would believe that he was the one being abused. Iris's partner had stolen all her journals, however, her partner ended up getting caught in court by some major lies in some of the documentation he provided. She said that the evidence built up over years but it's not something that she could have had proof of right away. It was helpful not only for court, but because she started to forget things over time, and many people didn't believe her side of things because it was so outrageous. Mia decided to listen to her instincts and got video proof of her partner's cheating when her daughter was a few weeks old:

It was part of the whole “you're crazy for thinking this” gaslighting business. I had set up a tape recorder in our house to catch him. I replayed the video to him and basically said, “You can't deny it. This happened. I know it did.”

Understanding Patterns. This is a subcode of ‘Self-Focus’ and represents that the PNTs had some realizations about the patterned INT behavior, recognizing that these behaviors are not the norm or productive for healthy relationships. The INT is the common denominator in similar patterns with other family, friends, and intimates. PNTs may see that their partners have a pattern of choosing kind, emotionally vulnerable, and agreeable people to surround themselves with and/or accomplished people who bring

status, intelligence, and other competencies to the relationship. 23 of the participants reported noticing patterns, helped them to understand their situations.

Wendy noticed that her partner always had a need to be with someone, and that his reaction to any perceived criticism was withdrawal. She sees her partner repeating his behaviors with their son, and his superficial relationships with everyone else in his life:

I started to notice a pattern that he had with me repeating with everybody he knew. It was the same thing that happened with his parents. It was the same thing that happened with his work people. The way I felt and the way I responded to him was exactly the same with every relationship he had.

Mona noticed that her partner treated others “meanly” as well, and similarly to Wendy’s, had patterns of leaving and played games using withdrawal:

And, he thought, “It will work out like if I leave her for four weeks.” I know he was playing the games like following, blocking and blocking. Throwing shade around for weeks the third time around. So, one week, three weeks, four weeks but I was very sure of that. By now, I had picked up on the pattern.

A couple participants pointed out that INTs became predictable in a need for control.

Valerie found out that her partner had a pattern of aggression towards people in childhood and his friends told her about the kind of intimidation that he used, including manipulation. If people did not do as he asked, he would tell them to leave. She watched her partner use generosity as a strategic manipulation, and later as a guilt trip. She also saw that he had a pattern of verbal violence. Dustin notice that his partner had a pattern never taking on accountability. The kinds of repeating behavior that he noticed with

others included rage and blaming. Eleanor's partner admitted to twisting blame around so that he never had to take accountability for his actions and seemed quite proud of himself for that manipulation. At some point in the relationship, she realized that her partner compartmentalized friendships to avoid having his various facades revealed. Cecilia saw that her partner had a pattern of lying and cheating and would claim to each partner that she was his soulmate. He used the same wooing techniques by love-bombing the people that he was with. She identified that he had a pattern of disrespecting women and that he burned bridges everywhere he went, which is why he keeps moving around. She believes that he married his next wife for her money and is using her. Diana saw that her partner would groom a "new girl" to take over from her even before they had terminated their relationship and she saw this pattern of behavior repeated over and over. Dorian found out that his partner did similar things with her previous husband as she did in their relationship. Iris said that her partner ended up with another woman who is 15 years younger and says that her personality is exactly like Iris's. She worries because this new partner is young and doesn't have an education or a career, so she feels that she is going to be "so stuck". Madeline has seen her ex repeat his patterns of blaming his partners for issues in the relationship, saying that their mental health is the problem, rather than recognizing that he is the "common denominator". "You're repeating patterns for destruction again." Because of his patterns of persistently pursuing and dating emotionally vulnerable women who didn't necessarily even want a relationship initially, Mia now recognizes that it was her partner who had the issues, "It's useful to see how other people handle him to see how to handle him. But I think it's seeing how much of

the issues and the personality come from his weaknesses.” Sophia observed that her partner dismisses people who no longer give him admiration. Megan’s partner seemed to repeatedly have a “flavour of the month”, even during the relationship, and she felt that he would groom wealthy older women to take advantage of them. She said that many of the wooing techniques that he uses in relationships, he would also use with clients, including big grandiose gestures, and hook them in by talking himself up. When something would go wrong (in some cases when clients ended up in hospital because of his actions) he would blame them and threaten lawsuits. “I think what has brought me a lot of peace, especially in the recent years, is to know that it wasn't just about me.” She realised that he felt it was OK to treat her like garbage because he was grooming new women to take her place (in much the same way he had with her). “He just repeats in just different ways in different relationships. Repeat offender. It’s comical almost to watch. Despite horrifying.” Dawn has gotten to know some of the new girlfriends and wives in her ex-partner’s life through of co-parenting, and has noticed a distinct trend in cheating, lying, threatening suicide to get his way. As well, his choice of partner, described as professional, confident, financially secure women that he later feels threatened by.

Some PNTs have seen their partners’ patterns being repeated with their children. Tara recounted that, “my kids will always say, “Oh my God, it's all about him. He complains nobody calls him, but he never calls us.” You know, conversation always has to be around him.” Nancy sees her partner using the same phrases and patterns of words with her kids, which she feels is designed to brainwash them. She can't avoid the kids getting hurt, but she is doing her best to teach them how to mitigate the damage:

My daughter is dealing with exactly what I dealt with. He is doing the exact same thing that he did to me. I only had this epiphany a week ago. “Holy fuck, he is doing this. She is now on his hook.” Because he stays far away, then he won’t call for a few days. He’ll really make her miss him. Now, “Oh, we love you daddy, we miss you. Distraught because we haven’t seen you.” He’s created all of that.

At first, Una couldn't figure out why her partner didn't contact his son:

When I met his family for the first time and seeing that the lack of closeness. My impression of his family before I met them was, “Oh, they must be like kind of cold and not very supportive.” And then I met them. I’m like, “Oh, they’re actually pretty nice and they’re pretty good.” So, having that discrepancy there. And seeing how little effort he put into friendships and how he wasn’t really ever making any attempts with the other relationships in his life. I think he definitely has a pattern of overvaluing and then cutting people out completely.

Ani found out that her partner had been lying about past girlfriends to make them out to be the “bad guy”, accusing them the problematic behaviors that he had perpetrated. Once separated, she connected the dots between financial entitlement, twisted blame, and rage:

Now after our marriage he dated another woman and her and I are friends now. And that was the same story that I heard from her, is that, number one, I was the horrible person, I had done all the things, I had cheated, I was all this, I was all that. I remember her saying to me, “I hated you. I thought, ‘What an awful human being. You had taken everything from him. He was living in a basement suite because you took all his money, because he was paying all this child support.’”

He's never paid, by the way, a penny. Of course, he had this big narrative that he is so hard done by. So, it's the same story he had told his new girlfriend that he had told me about his ex. And then his new girlfriend of course would describe, "Oh, when we were on the rocks, he wanted to have a baby with me, we needed to have kids." That was the same story. So, it's this like "Oh, I need to keep you trapped. I need to keep you stuck. I need to make sure you can't leave. I need to create some sort of attachment to you." So that was the patterns that I had seen.

Robin was also seeing similar behaviors with past friends and partners in her ex's life. She feels that her ex targeted her for her insecurities and believes that he specifically chose someone who was emotionally vulnerable. She realizes that he had been saying the same things about his exes as he now is about her, and had behaved the same way in each relationship, "You can see the trail of lies just following him everywhere he goes." likewise, Ruby has seen her partner's need to be the "white knight", rescuing helpless women. She feels that he will always prey on single females who need help and will continue to move on to new women many years younger who are vulnerable. Even during their relationship, she had seen him grooming them and how he operates with the women who were his "projects". She stated that he has a predatory way of "knowing, is insightful as to what their needs are, what buttons to press, and what words to say".

I think for him to feel self-worth and his value and all of his self-identity and self-ideals, he needed his partners to be a certain thing. To be slightly flawed or to be slightly broken or to be insecure. So, for him to be kind of the saviour, for him to be the knight in shining armour that came to rescue us partners. (Claire)

She discussed that her partner would come up with excuses and blame others for his cheating, such as saying it was the other person's mental health that was a problem. She began to see repetitive negative behaviors with herself and others and recognized his pattern of lying. She said he would take what he wanted from others, giving little in return which would, "leave you dry". Friends of Jessica's ex and other girlfriends of his corroborated what had happened in her relationship regarding her partner's patterns:

There were other stories that I heard and again, I heard them from [INT]'s perspective about a business that he started and him having legal fights with some other people in the business. And him ending up just giving it to them because they didn't see eye-to-eye. And now, I look back and I remember some of the things he told me and I'm like, "Ah, that makes a bit more sense." At the time, I was like, "Oh, that's terrible that you just can't sort something out." Thinking it was issues of the other people because he seemed like a reasonable guy to me. So, certainly I've seen those patterns. And friends of mine also, they heard from him about projects he hadn't completed or whatever it might be, they later said to me, "Gosh, this seems like a pattern for him, things are incomplete. Big things, talking a lot, big talk and big grandiose ideas but then actually not finishing things. That seems like a bit of a pattern." I was like, "Hum, I never thought about it like that."

Brooke noticed a few things besides her partner's predictability, such as building people up to tear them down, cheating, and lying:

What's really funny, to somebody who actually has been through it and can really see it clearly, their predictability is... I can put money on it. I did so today with a

girlfriend who called this morning in tears. I said, this is what he's going to do, and I guarantee it. You call me tomorrow and tell me if he does it. And I guarantee he'll do it. He is so predictable in his narcissistic behaviour. I had to say to her, I know you've heard it's not about you. It is truly about being in control. He's not wanting to hurt you. He's wanting to be in control and feel that high. And that's what he gets from hurting you. The weird part is, outside of it, I see how predictable it was. When you're actually in it, there is no predictability. In fact, you often feel sideswiped. You're, like, "Where did that come from?" When now I look back, I'm, like, oh, I know exactly where that came from. And that actually was right on cue. That happened right when it should happen in his trajectory of how he wanted things to go.

Kyla, on the other hand, saw no observable or translatable pattern from her ex's previous relationships to her own, especially since she was his first committed relationship.

Space. This is a subcode of 'Coping and Recovery' which represents PNTs distancing themselves from the INTs physically and/or mentally. This may be accidental, but was often deliberate, and may include blocking their former partner completely so that they can avoid pain or any temptation to return to the relationship. The space may offer time to heal and reflect, to gain clarity ("clear the fog"), and to come up with next steps. Participants may be sitting with their feelings for the first time in a long time. The space may allow for feelings of self-efficacy and independence to grow, as well as a sense of freedom and the ability to breathe again. 26 participants mentioned space as an important factor in their recovery from their relationships.

Madeline said that taking space toward the end of the relationship led to a divorce request. After that point she had room to feel free. She felt like she could breathe, do the things that she wanted to do, and be herself again. She is now puts herself first. Ani and her partner had moved apart temporarily, and she realized that things were much easier when he was gone, “I don’t think I had space to even think about that until he moved away and that it was in that moment, I started to realize that.” (That rage is not the norm in a relationship.) Dustin said that being alone helped to “sit with myself and focus on” the time he spent being abused and the reasons as to why he kept saying yes to everything happening in his relationship. Rita felt that it was a really big step for her to leave the common space because of the memories involved, “The more distance I got from him, the better I did. Things got clearer again”. Vanessa stated, “sometimes the hardest part is realising that maybe you’re better off on your own for awhile”.

Having some space gave Dawn the ability to call her soon-to-be ex out on his lies, “Well, you were in a safer place. You weren’t having to sleep with the person who’s furious with you.” She was able to “step back and be able to breathe and see options”.

Surprisingly, the pandemic was one of the most powerful things as well because it allowed me to just stop and reflect and come back to myself and to not feel anxious. I had this kind of fear like, I couldn’t move on because I was still being haunted in a way. But I think the pandemic helped me to have a feeling of safety, which is what definitely helped me to kind of heal and move on. (Wendy)

Jessica emphasized the importance of her getting distance from her partner she felt that if she hadn’t completely closed the door her life would be “horrific” right now.

He wanted to remain friends afterwards and I could not do it. It has helped to have no relationship whatsoever. I also cut out any contact with his mother, or any of the friends that we somewhat had in common. I felt that if he was still in my life in some capacity, I would not be able to move forward in the ways I needed. I felt like he would still be attempting to manipulate me in some ways. (Claire)

Likewise, Mia felt that she had to make a situation that there was no coming back from so that she would not get entangled into the relationship again, “Looking back, I think I just needed to blow things up so that I wouldn’t keep getting pulled back in.” She says that she has developed systems to keep a distance from her former partner and his control. She could get a “crazy three-page angry email from him over absolutely nothing”, but now they just go into a folder in her email, and she doesn’t see them. “So, it’s things like that, that I’m able to control the communication more really helps”. She also says that going no contact would’ve been easier if she could’ve done that. Robin indicated that going no contact by blocking and avoiding any emails and texts allowed her to see the “surreal events” of the relationship more clearly.

I went to go stay with my dad and my stepmom because I thought if I stay here, this is going to keep happening. So, I had to physically removed myself to make sure that that wasn’t going to happen again. Getting away. Literally leaving the [entire area], not being here, and noncompromisable space. I knew because we had probably verbally broken up 1000 times in a fight, he would be, like, “I’m not letting you do that.” And I knew it never worked. So actually leaving. I needed to be away and see the world. (Megan)

Probably the most difficult was not reaching out, don't call, don't get in touch, don't try and open that door again. I wrote letters to myself about that. I wrote lists of all the ways that I had been hurt in the relationship and all the damage that had been done. I would read those over very regularly because I needed to remember that aching chasm I felt then wasn't going to be there forever. (Una)

Distance. Getting my own apartment... getting my own space, getting away from him. Because when I'm with him I don't see him clearly. I still treat him nicely when I see him, even though he makes my skin crawl. The minute I'm independent of him financially, all the documents are signed or whatever, I never want to see him again. (Elise)

Support. This subcode of 'Coping and Recovery' indicates the experience of support in the latter part and the aftermath as it relates to healing. In some cases, family and friends may begin to understand what the PNT was going through in the relationship, whereas they may not have previously. This is addressed in the 'Support' code (Roller Coaster theme), combined with earlier experiences of support.

Community of Understanding. This subcode of 'Support' indicates the importance of having a community of people who have experienced or can understand what the PNTs underwent during their relationships which thus assists in the healing process. Community members may help to validate the experiences and outcomes. This may include support groups, church groups, co-workers, friends, and family etc. 18 participants referred to people or groups who provided support through understanding.

Robin said that venting to friends and having a community of support helped her because she needed to talk, and she had so much information to process. This was the most significant recovery piece for her. She realized that many people didn't comprehend why she didn't walk away from the abuse because they could not grasp the full picture. She felt that some of the questions people asked felt like victim blaming, and that was why an understanding community was so crucial to healing.

Other found solace in commiserating with friends. Brooke stated, "I have a number of friends around me who have gone through that. What's interesting is I've been able to help them through a lot of it, having had my own experience." Valerie had a friend who was able to give her insights into her experiences because of a similar relationship, "So a lot of her own experiences that shared with me made me realize how toxic my relationship was at the time. I didn't really realize that I was in a toxic relationship". She highlighted the need for support the specific to narcissistic dyads:

Just being able to identify, recognize, and of course once you find yourself in an abusive relationship like that, how are you able to get the help and support you need? Who do you talk to? And if you can't talk to your family members or your friends, is there anyone else that you can turn to who could give you more objective perspective?

Ava was able to talk to her mom who could understand because of the mutual experience of her father gaslighting her mother. Dustin sought insight and connection to others who understand through a Facebook support group for partners of narcissists. Cecilia also joined a similar group and spoke with friends with comparable stories. She feels she has a

new level of understanding after experiencing this kind of abuse. She wants other people who've gone through this to be able to give themselves grace and to use every support they can. They need to access friends, family, and to "know that they're not alone in this". Some described having a community of understanding to be like "a club" that you don't want to belong to:

It's such a huge and important level of emotional abuse, and anyone who's been through it recognizes that. But given my court experience, the fact that there's no weight put on that blows my mind. It's not like a psychological illness, and it's not weaponized. It's not considered to be abuse, other than those of us who have been abused by these people. It's sort of a weird little underground area where we can talk about it. (Mia)

You can have your own club. It's a little bit like if you've been a child of an alcoholic, you all know what it's like to have that person come home drunk. There's some commonalities that are so profound. Because there's only a certain amount of way to screw people's minds up. You don't hear about it until you have one and then, you hear all these people. "Oh, that happened to me. Oh, that happened." Suddenly, you have this community of support that you didn't know. When I started describing the behaviors, then there are people who have been through it and then, like this big relief of "You get it." So, then you find people who speak the language, then you know how to speak the language more. Then, you can put words to what you've been through and to have somebody believe you is probably one of the most powerful experiences. (Eleanor)

I've talked about it more recently because one of my girlfriends has also gone through a narcissistic relationship. And so, we talk a lot about stuff and just process through some stuff, which I did not for a long time. Because I was, like, I can't touch any of that stuff at all. It's a unique experience. It's a horrible experience, but it puts you in this club that I don't know you want to sign up for. But it's an undeniable club. (Megan)

I had some girlfriends that were maybe sharing some of the same issues with their own situations and struggling with their own sanity. I'd hear their stories and be, like, oh yeah, that's how I feel. And so there would be some sort of camaraderie in that. That was certainly... became a club of crazy women. (Vanessa)

New Partner. This is a subcode of 'Support' and indicates that new partners may provide a sense of contrast to the INTs and a feeling of support, healing, and normalcy for relationships. In some cases, it allowed the PNTs to see that there are possibilities to meet kind people, and to reclaim their own desirability. 19 participants spoke about the disparities between new partners to that of the INTs.

Seeing how much I was respected and cared for, just in a platonic way. "Oh, this is what it can feel like to be cared and not shut down and not judged and not criticized and not manipulated. It exists, great". So that idea, that hopefulness of, "I can feel something different" I think put what I was in into a bit more clarity of "oh, this is actually really harsh". I think when I started seeing the more abusive language come out for him, like the boo hoo, things like that, that might have been more subtle before. (Claire)

Dawn joked that her “boyfriend is worth not being single for”. Una expressed that her new partner is a contrast to her ex and that dating in general was important because it showed to herself that she was interesting and desirable to other people. She feels that her new partner honours her big heart:

I started dating again. I think that that was something I needed to do as well, to get some of that validation that, “Oh hey, I’m actually interesting to other people again.” And I was very intentional about it. I was not going to have a relationship with these people. It was more like, “I’m just going to go on some dates and have some nice dinners and remind myself that there is more to me than my ex.

Some discussed how fear and baggage from their old relationships affected their new ones. Megan said that an “awful” lack of trust has shown up in her four-year relationship, but not nearly as much as in the beginning. Nancy was able to express her fears and boundaries to her new partner and is excited that together they can give her kids a good model and tools for relationships:

It was just really refreshing. I said all these things, “I am afraid that you are going to get out of the car right now and go. I’m afraid to even tell you these things because of what might happen.” But just telling him how I felt or that I needed something else scared the shit out of me. And I acknowledged it. I put it out there in the car and he took it, he held it, he accepted it, and acknowledged it. And it felt really fucking weird. I was like, “Something is wrong. This isn’t right.” But that’s normal. For so long, I have not known what normal feels like. That you can talk to your partner and say what you want and have him say, “You are actually

worthy of asking for what you want. And don't ever think that you're not." The opposite would come out my ex's mouth.

Robin said that she still expects similar dysfunctional behaviours from her new partner but that it is actually healthy. Having admiration and attraction from a new partner was a helpful antidote to her ex treating her as if he found her ugly. Kyla's new partner is also a contrast and helped her to see her value. She said that her self-esteem increased, and she was able to identify what she wanted to do with her life. Wendy stated that she, "actually met someone else that I really appreciated and that kind of shone a mirror on my boyfriend. Because this person was just a very good listener and all these things that reflected what my boyfriend wasn't like." She feels confident that her new partner gives her alternative perspectives and is honest about what they see. She feels she can be her whole self with him, and this helped her to leave her unhealthy situation. Elise also met someone who provided some necessary contrast helping her to leave her unhealthy relationship. This person pointed out her unhappiness and asked her, "what's keeping you from leaving this marriage?" She asserted that she makes a point of being very honest about how she feels and doesn't hide anything from him. When she reveals herself to be hurt by something, he would apologize and say, "I'm sorry I won't do it anymore". He also says, "I love you and I'm attracted to you. And I'm not going to ever say it again."

Literally it wasn't until now where I realized that "Wow, okay this is what a healthy relationship is supposed to look like." I had no idea. Weird. "Well, I just don't really have any expectations. It's never really worked out for me." When Valentine's Day rolled around, I had a dozen red roses delivered to me at work

with a card that said, “I love you more than yesterday but less than tomorrow.” I started bawling at work. My girlfriends there were like, “Oh my God, why are you crying? This is wonderful.” I realized I had never been given flowers on Valentine’s Day before. Ever. It was always just forgotten. My needs were forgotten. Those are things that just floored me because I had never been a priority before. (Cecilia)

Independence. This is a subcode of ‘Coping and Recovery’ and indicates a push-back on relationship dynamics and beliefs. The PNT may be motivated to prove their partners wrong. Often this occurred prebreak up, was an ego threat to the INT partner, and was a turning point. This could include a difference in PNT attitude, going back to or a new job or school, becoming exposed to external ideas, validated abilities, increased financial security, and increased self-efficacy or self-esteem. 19 participants identified important moments of independence towards or during the ending.

In the final year of Ava’s relationship, she started having “me” time again which her partner didn’t like because of increasing independence. Madeline decided she needed to get stronger and started doing things for herself such as working out and me time as well. She realized that when she finally got to a point where she felt a bit of “lightness” for herself, her partner would “strike”. Elise attempted a “grey rock” technique to self-preserve (communicating in a brief and unemotional way) and observed that her partner would get angry whenever she used it. However, she felt able to take back some power in those moments. She noticed that her partner did not like it when she was doing something that made her feel good, “every time I would mention it my husband would get sullen.

When I was happy, he was not happy.” Morgan talked about how therapy helped to begin to “detach” to the point of walking out on her partner. Ruby found out that her partner was no longer happy once she had gotten to a place where she didn’t need “rescuing”:

With the wisdom of hindsight, I now can see the timeline much more clearly. As soon as I began to get less dependent on him for comfort, mentorship, sustainability, help, and all of that, his agenda shifted. He had very much an agenda of rescuing “helpless” women, women who were single, women who were in a state of need, and I started to see that pattern, once I started becoming more independent. And so, I didn’t have as much need for him in his estimation.

When I look back, it’s like he was looking for, not new victims, but that’s kind of what it seemed like. New women to rescue. I no longer needed to be rescued.

Iris was glad that she had been brought up as independent and could support herself because if not, her relationship may have had a different outcome. Valerie echoed, “I was able to maintain my own financial independence. And I think that’s really important. Had I not been able to do that, to remain independent, both financially and socially, I probably would have been stuck in that relationship.” Once separated, Tara was able to see clearly that she had not been the one who had been responsible for the serious financial difficulties she and her partner had been facing:

“Hey, I can do this. I bought a car on my own. I bought a house on my own. I’ve done this on my own. I’ve saved money on my own.” All those times I was blamed for the financial situation, “I have money and you don’t have any now.”

For some participants, work and school was a way to promote their own independence. Claire mentioned that going to school was grounding for her and it provided a reprieve from her isolation. She was then able to go on to a fulfilling career which allowed her a sense of independence and self-efficacy. She stated that she was not playing a role for someone else and became secure in her ability to survive without a partner. Megan felt that it was a significant turning point when she decided to move into her own place and to take control over her life. She started going back to the gym and also got a job. Kyla was able to use her partner's financial stresses to convince him to let her go back to work:

I think that going back to work and having this paycheque and having this job that was important to me, it really injected a lot of that independent spirit back into me. When I left him, he told me I would never make it on my own. I would never be able to take care of myself. I would just flail. I did it. I made every sacrifice that I had to make, and I pushed through. And I made it to the other side, and I'm successful and educated. And I did it without him. So, I think proving him wrong, that felt good to me.

Vanessa also speculated that her new sense of independence and validation with her schooling and career may have sparked the end of the relationship:

“Hey, I really want to go back and do X, Y and Z”. I believe that when I started to go back to my sport life, which is where he met me in the beginning, is that when the wheels started to fall off the cart. I started to remember who I was. I started to remember my old career that I loved.

Similarly, Una believed it was her new sense of independence that prompted the breakup:

I think those last couple of months, after we were living apart, [self-esteem] was actually increasing then. I think that's actually part of the reason that there was a breakup. I was finding that sense of self again. I think that that was not welcome.

Modelling. This is a subcode of 'Coping and Recovery' and represents taking learning and demonstrating wisdom for others to help with self-healing. Participants related this to their children, mentees, and others experiencing similar situations.

Kids. This is a subcode of "Modelling" and represents the strength and healing that came from being a parent and a wish for positive things in their children's lives. This includes the desire to protect them from negative patterns and to make sure that they are exposed to alternative behaviors, which meant choosing different things. Kids may have been an inspiration for ending the relationship and seeking healthier patterns. Ten participants spoke about making different choices for their children or future ones. Kyla thought of home-insecurity in her childhood and realized that there was no way that she could let that happen to a child. Reminding herself about the future possibility of children and their wellbeing kept Morgan from reentering the relationship:

I kept repeating to myself that if you go back to him, there's no way you're not going to have a kid (because Indian families and pressure and everything). And, if you bring a child into this world, and he or she is stuck with a father like that, who is very clearly selfish, there's no way I can do that. I just kept reminding myself that I can't do that to my kid. I can't knowingly choose a partner who is mean. What if he walks out on my kid tomorrow? What am I going to do?

In some cases, having children made it more difficult to leave the relationship, but some of the parents communicated that they were concerned enough about the effects of the relationship on their children to leave. Sophia mentioned that for part of the relationship, she had been able to distract herself from the negatives by focusing on her children, which may have prolonged the relationship. Iris saw her partner belittling her kids and she felt she had to protect them by leaving. Vanessa was worried about her son's behavior in emulating his father by treating her like a "doormat. She said that she was "suddenly feeling like I've created monsters all over, and I have to do something about that. I don't know what it is." Feeling that, "just having a son that I've watched the toll this has sort of taken on him" was enough to prompt forward motion for her to leave and try to mitigate damage. "I've always said, lead the life that I would want him to have permission to lead." It was important to Mia that she not model the kind of relationship that she was having with her INT partner to her daughter. She wanted to show her "healthy relationship ideals". Likewise, Kyla wanted to be a positive female role model for her son:

I always felt like I wanted to be this role model for my son, to teach him that women are valuable, that they are important, and they can do anything that his dad can do or whatever. Because I was so afraid that he would turn out like his dad if I didn't really.

Nancy confessed that because she did not trust her intuition to interpret the red flags from her partner, that she wants her kids to trust theirs. She knows that she can't avoid them being hurt, but she is doing her best to mitigate the damage by teaching them boundaries.

She wants to model happy, healthy relationships, and to give her children tools to create their own. She is modelling moving forward and doing well in life:

I implore my kids to trust their intuition vehemently because I didn't. I have no way of helping them, except teaching them. We talk about boundaries every fucking day. My eight-year-old will be a fucking genius on boundaries when she is an adult. I tell her, "I know you are little, and I know this is hard". I never ever use examples, but she always brings up her dad. I do say it's important to have boundaries even with people that you love. Especially with people you love. There's no limit to how open or closed boundaries can be. I try really, really, hard to transfer the things that I have learned in my counselling sessions because I'm not some sort of genius, "Hey lady, why didn't you say these things to yourself when you were 20?" Because I didn't know what a boundary fucking was.

Several the participants spoke about how their children gave them strength and confidence as a parent. Claire said that she derived confidence from being a parent and became more at peace with herself. Dawn found out that she was stronger than she knew, and that her "son gives me strength". Dorian expressed that he wants to be able to give his kids everything and is focused on their happiness. Tara felt that her children were crucial to her recovery, "I had to keep going for my kids".

Mentoring. This is a subcode of 'Modelling' which indicates that mentoring others helped in some way in their recovery. Participants may have been demonstrating lessons learned, strength, and resilience discovered during their journey with an INT partner. Six participants spoke about mentoring others as an important part of healing.

Vanessa discussed her passion for helping girls find their voices in sport and life. She wants them to be able to say “no”. She says that it is crucial that they give themselves “permission to step in and be as big as possible”. “I get so excited when I see people catch a glimpse of themselves...”. Dorian says that he loves teaching and helping the younger guys in his profession by giving them the benefit of his experience:

I work in a very A-type, male-dominated profession, and a lot of guys on my crew, they’re friends and we’ll be in the gym working out and all of a sudden, it’s like, “This is kind of what I was going through.” And I’ll sit there and talk all day long with them, because it’s important. Because if they’re going to open up and reach out, what they don’t need is somebody who will laugh at them or dismiss it or devalue what they’re saying. Because I want that. You need to be validated, right? You need to go, “You know what, those feelings are okay. It’s okay to talk.” I’m not afraid to say that.

He will also help other men to identify what they might be experiencing:

My buddy was going through a divorce at the same time, and it was really helpful because he would tell me these stories. I’m like, “Oh man, that’s called ‘protection’” or “that’s called ‘devalue’” or “that’s where...” There’s all these labels for everything.

Brooke has had several friends who have experienced similar dynamics, and she feels that she has been able to help them through because of her relationship:

If somebody tells me that they’re in this relationship now similar to mine, I wouldn’t say “how?” I get how. It’s more of what the person needs to do to get

themselves out of it. To be strong enough to recognize that it's manipulative. And that's not an easy process. I could never tell somebody this is going to be easy for you. It sucks. One of the first things I say is, "There's nothing you can say to me that is going to make me judge. Everyone does things for a reason." And I think being with a narcissist is almost a way of not dealing with your own crap.

Elise has learned that sometimes people need a safe place to vent and is able to provide that because of what she needed in her recovery:

The nicest thing you could ever say to her is that I'll never get sick of hearing you complain about this. This is your process, and don't stop telling me stuff just because you get sick of hearing yourself. It takes a long time to get out of these things and figure these things out.

One main thing Cecilia feels is important is, "The big things that I have told several women is about forgiving yourself. Giving yourself grace."

In summary, participants delineated many forms of coping over the course of their relationships and in the aftermath. It was interesting to note that for some the recovery of the self seemed to occur before the relationship had ended and may have been a catalyst for the final moments. A new self-focus, space from the INTs, support from different sources, a sense of newfound independence, and modelling appeared to be the most vital factors in recovery.

Hindsight

This fifth theme represents the knowledge and wisdom that each PNT may have accrued from their experiences and in their ability to look back with increased clarity and

distance. PNTs often felt changed in some way by the relationships, and the data shows that they most often have taken a strength-based stance with some positive learning, while simultaneously understanding that it was not a functional situation. Participants may feel that their abilities to recognize certain dysfunctional behaviors are magnified, and there can be increased understanding of roles and responsibilities in the relationships. There may exist holdover issues from the relationships that PNTs are continuing to deal with, but in most cases, time, space, and other healing activities have allowed for regaining or creating wellness and current healthy relationships. In a couple cases, however, there has not been full distance and healing at the time of the interview.

Please see Appendix D for the Code Hierarchies map.

Self View- Post

This main code represents how the participants felt about themselves after the relationship had terminated for the final time.

Madeline has learned to accept herself and now feels that she doesn't "need to cater to other people". She says that she gained strength in the end and feels herself coming back. She is now happy at this point in her life and can see the possibilities and directions that life can take her. Robin now realizes that the negative issues in the relationship were not her fault, and she believes that she went "above and beyond." She feels that she can move on in a healthy way despite the relationship, and is working on not putting others before herself. She is still the same "giver" that she always was, but only if there is reciprocity. She is learning to be confident, although says it's a struggle because her partner's behaviour made her feel like a bad partner. She now understands

that she has a lot to offer a new partner and notices that her experiences became part of her identity. Ava described herself as naïve at the beginning which is now not the case. She is still, however, an optimistic person who counts her blessings. Dustin said that he is back to his “lively, jolly, goofy, positive self” again. He respects himself now and feels respect coming from other places too. He is loving life and also feels “awesome” about himself. Eleanor has realized about herself that she does not have the skill for manipulation as her partner did, having not honed it for a lifetime. She has concluded that she does not have infinite capacity to give and will express her needs. Cecilia is realizing that she did not get any validation in the relationship, but that she deserves it. She is being mindful not to carry the conditioning that came from the relationship forward into new relationships, such as putting her needs on the back burner. She considers herself to be very intuitive and listens to herself. She says:

I’m happy. I can honestly say for the first time in my entire life, I’m genuinely happy with my downtimes, but I have my moments. But I can recognize that. I’m grateful. I’m blessed. I feel like I’m living again, finally.

She is no longer feeling “haggard, ugly, and saggy” as her partner told her toward the end. She makes sure to protect herself. “It’s okay to bring that little child Cecilia up to the surface and say, ‘You know, you’re going to be okay. And everybody loves you too’”.

I would say I’m back to the version of myself when I was 20. I would say I’m bold, that I’m honest and I’m brave and I’ve got no problem telling people exactly how it is. But I would say that there’s very little leeway in terms of the way I’m going to tolerate being treated. So, I have no problem saying how I feel

and really being open to having those conversations. I ultimately will always carry a fear of being in a committed relationship where I might start to lose myself. So, I also think that I'm acutely aware of the fact that I have unnecessary boundaries up as well. (Ani)

Kyla believes that it was a mistake of youth to marry her partner. She rediscovered self-reliance since she had space from her ex. She now feels successful and educated by doing things on her own, although she still has insecurities. She thinks she was "meek and let the world pass by" but doesn't do so anymore. She lets her wants be priority and although she has a hard time letting people help her, she continues to preserve her independence, "Now I realize you have to be selfish. You have to take care of yourself before you take care of somebody else".

Ruby and Una admire their capacity for giving love and openness and now understand that they are positive qualities rather than detrimental. "I know that I am a person who loves deeply and can still love deeply. And, that that's okay. Just because I love deeply doesn't mean that I did something wrong." (Ruby) She says that her journey and healing has been long but that she is their survivor and is resilient and strong. She refuses to let the experience of an INT partner define her. She believes she is still a "valuable, intelligent, worthwhile person" who can help other people, because she did formerly wonder about those things. She says now she is more guarded than perhaps is healthy but that she is also very good at taking things in stride. Through this process she has found so many wonderful things about herself and discovered her capabilities.

Megan established that through this process she has recognized her strength and worth, however she is still struggling a little bit. She still feels some shame that her story seems surreal; it's hard to believe it happened. She describes it as like a "horrible dream, so wild that you couldn't even make that crap up". She is very aware that she still questions herself on what exactly happened because during the relationship because her partner had made her question so much about what she was perceiving. She says that even though she knows that these things happened, there is still a huge part of her that questions whether it was as bad as she remembers, or if she was blowing it out of proportion. She feels very powerful in her career, motivated and passionate, using her intuition and following her ethics, which she believes are unshakable. She considers herself to be a very protective person and more introverted which is a change from how she used to see herself as very outgoing and free. She feels that she grew a lot through the experience and that she's become "very much more of what life is meant to be" in terms of not working to live. She now knows that her "capacity to learn and do things under pressure and in very treacherous circumstances is undeniable. So, I think I gained a lot of confidence from that despite also having my confidence torn down". She says that there was a lot of humility that came out of the experience as well, and that she had to get "very comfortable in being uncomfortable, by accepting the shame and recognizing that that's okay". Dawn discovered that she was stronger than she knew. She says that she is now a realist and probably more cynical about romance. She "definitely recognizes that perfect doesn't exist", but also that she's more tolerant of things which aren't perfect. She said that after she processed it, she was just happy to be free. She describes herself as still

accommodating and nice, but with boundaries. Tara explained that feels compelled to check with other people to get their opinions. Life is calmer and more peaceful now, and she thinks she might have gotten “addicted to the chaos” for a while. She is now feeling more confident, that no matter what happens, I’ve got this, I’ll figure it out somehow. She knows that she is not the life of the party but is content about that knowledge because she cares for people and can make good solid connections that are meaningful. She now validates herself for who she is and tells herself that it’s okay not to be who she is not. Dorian expressed that he is learning to do all kinds of things at 45 years old. He formerly described himself as having zero boundaries, and now he can keep and enforce them. He knows that he doesn’t deserve to be treated that way, nor does anyone else. He also says he has no problems opening-up to anyone now. Mia says that it was a big shift for her because she is much stronger now than she was at the beginning of her relationship. Immense growth happened due to her situation, “I think the steps that I made during those periods are probably the growth that I would’ve expected to have in my entire timeline of my life.” She has reframed her ex’s role in her life as free babysitting, which has been a helpful perspective. She feared being jaded and not trusting people, but her fears did not come to fruition. She doesn’t feel hardened or that she had lost hope because of the experience, on the contrary she feels “whole again”. Valerie says that she is much calmer now, at ease, and balanced in her current relationship. She has realized what is important in life and feels no need to be subservient:

I didn’t think I would be so confrontational. I never really thought that I would be the kind of person to voice my thoughts and opinions. Yes, I definitely feel a lot

more comfortable voicing my own thoughts and concerns. And I think that I'm more responsible with my own thoughts and decisions. I have the confidence to make my own decisions without having to defer that to another person.

She feels more responsible for her own decisions and doesn't defer to others anymore. Now she knows she would not put up with the INT behaviours and the extreme focus on her body, "no one else can have that control". Ani thinks she is still "way too forgiving", and her extra boundaries are a protective factor to keep her from losing herself. Jessica still hates confrontation, but she is far more confident about herself now, "That certainly came from having to manage myself through the ugliness of the breakup and the three-year legal battle." She continues to see the good in people and is attempting to trust her gut as an overriding force. Brooke has more insight and appreciation for what's important and what should be a priority in her life. She chose to marry someone who was "right for her rather than exciting". She has gotten stronger mentally and does not need the same kind of validation that she has in the past. "Because of it, I have become a more compassionate and empathetic person I think, understanding."

Claire has decided that she doesn't want to be responsible for other people's feelings or fit into a role. She is learning to challenge things that she doesn't agree with. She feels that she knows who she doesn't want to be, feels grounded, and is taking comfort in being herself. Diana has learned that she is strong, and she was able to pull herself out of her bad situation relatively quickly. She says that she definitely deserves better. She believes that she still broken but that she does have happiness. She expressed that she is mad at herself for not dealing with things sooner, seeing how bad that things

were, and for being manipulated. Rita says that she is heartbroken over what she went through but that she got herself into therapy and was in it for years. She has slowly rebuilt her life, and now she has a “great life”. She says that she “learned humility, was disappointed in overreactions, and ashamed of losing self-respect”. She says that she is good at “owning myself now”, and her self-respect has returned. However, she does have a lingering anxiety disorder. She has a safe and peaceful home and remarkable relationships. However, she stated that she, feels like “everything I love goes, dies, or is rotten”. She hopes that she can have long term relationships and assert her boundaries because she would really dislike herself if the answer was no. Fortunately, she doesn’t dislike herself at the moment and she’s pretty proud of herself:

One close friend asks me how I’m doing, I say “I’m happy and whole”. W-H-O-L-E. I think I’m pretty great. I’ve got some flaws for sure but I’m the captain of my own ship now. I own the ways I mess up. I pay a lot of attention to my mistakes. I work hard to not repeat them. I apologize when I make them.

Morgan established a lot of “grounding” for herself and feels that she has done very well herself. She admitted that she had no sense of self in the past, and that even now she struggles with it because her partner diminished whatever little bit was there. She believes that she is very strong and has a lot more value to her than she was ever given by others. She said that in the past she was told that she loved too much but says, “I don’t honestly know how to get rid of it or how to change it”. She feels that she is better at judging people and has new wisdom. She now believes that relationships should be 50/50. She is beginning to admire certain qualities about herself that she felt she was

made to feel badly about, “I’m still trying to learn but that being sensitive is not a wrong thing. Because I was always told I was too sensitive, too emotional”. Elise voiced that she would take on subtle criticism as something she must change within, now she sees it as just information. She has some instincts that tell her to keep trying, but now tells herself that she is perfect the way she is. She admits that there is still some self-doubt:

I am learning to become less comfortable with the Stepford wife exterior. I started with friends. But I actually didn’t like them or didn’t like the way I felt with them. And so, I would laugh and be pleasant and blah, blah, blah. But didn’t really enjoy their company. I had to stop doing that. I’ve learned that everybody’s flawed and that my flaws don’t make me terrible. My job is not to fix every single one of my flaws in life. To just live with them. And to not feel super horrible about myself when one of my flaws bites me in the ass.

In an update, she mentioned that there has been incremental improvement since the interview, saying, “My worthiness of support isn’t predicated on someone believing his behaviours were impactful on me. Personal depletion is, at last, safe to own.”

Una admitted that she has always been a “people pleaser”, but that characteristic was reinforced in her relationship. She realizes that she’s even more conflict averse than she was previously. She still surprised at how quickly she dropped her own identity, which eroded her belief of being a strong and resilient person, “I think I was surprised that how easily and insidiously I left my own identity out of things and how quickly that happens”. She says that she is probably more cautious or conscious of red flags. She’s not entirely sure if she takes good personal responsibility or takes other people’s “stuff” on

herself. Iris conveyed that she has a hard skin now and it took a while to get her confidence back, but she is feeling it now. She admits, "I'm not a confrontational person. I would rather avoid than deal with it, which is the other problem." Nancy believes that it is important to ask for one's needs and wants, so she is working on learning to do that:

It's still hard for me to this day to talk about what I want or need in a relationship.

It's not 100% safe yet. I still automatically revert to, "Don't fuck things up." I

wasn't fucking anything up. I never was. I was just made to think that.

She now feels smart and that she is worth it. She spends time being present and acknowledging her worth and capabilities. She feels that she is starting to open her eyes and see that she is capable and worthy of being happy. She's no longer afraid of the unknown or of being alone because she had been doing it alone. Wendy established that she didn't have a sense of self and couldn't identify what she liked in comparison with her partner. She says that now she's rediscovered what she likes and what she wants to do. She is "doing things slowly but in a way that feels very authentic" and she considers that better for her. "I think it also shook me because I didn't think I would let that happen. I didn't think that I would tolerate the way that he treated me".

Mona believes that it will take time for her to forgive herself before there's any sort of growth forward. She no longer wants to accept the idea of one-sided relationships. She has some worries about entering a new relationship, "I worry about what I would be like in a relationship. I worry about replicating that again or, how does that manifest?" Sophia is also having some difficulties in recovery and expressed:

Without him, now my world is gone.” I felt strong overcoming all this after [daughter] was born, that I was able to overcome all this stuff. Now, I’m really down on myself because I feel like... I blame him because I am where I am because of him, but what can I offer now? It’s more questionable for me.

She feels robbed of the family ideal and is left with self-doubt and insecurities, saying, “I see him flourishing, blossoming, and just best years of his life right now. I feel cheated, so I feel bitter, and that’s not a good characteristic. So, again, that adds to that whole narrative of me being sad.” She has had two relationships since her INT partner, and feels little pieces of herself coming back but knows that she is still not there:

I feel guilty because being a mom isn’t enough for me. I want more. I want to experience it all over again in a different way. My ego is definitely shot to hell, and I think, as a woman, being older and just having that taken away from you.

Morgan stated that she had no sense of herself and is unsure even to date:

Am I crazy? Did this really happen? Did I make that up? Or did I just bring it on?” So, the gaslighting and everything has had a deep impact on my perception of what’s reality and what’s not. What actually occurred. So, just self-doubt.

That’s something I battle very constantly.

Vanessa has described herself as a perfectionist and that she’s hard on herself, which is why she is always felt like everything was her fault. She admits that she is still struggling to work that out right now and that she hasn’t completely figured everything out yet. She has extreme anxiety now, describes herself as insecure, and has moods because she has fears of not being “okay” or “enough” even when she’s done something really well. She

indicated that she lives with that chronically and is trying to work on that. “Those are the scars of this relationship.” She describes herself as still very accommodating and that she doesn’t have a good concept of herself. She still can’t receive compliments and believes that nothing that she does is ever good enough. She knows she starting to grow but doesn’t yet feel like she has permission to do so. She is struggling with imposter syndrome because she feels like she doesn’t deserve the accolades that she is getting at school. Now she is trying to reclaim her life and to give herself inner validation. She knows it’s time to face herself and to see what’s there. She doesn’t want to beat herself up, but she is afraid. She still battles with self-worth. The cognitive dissonance and habit of catching herself in negatives is worse since being in her marriage; there is a mismatch between what she rationally knows to be true versus the emotional feeling around it:

It’s like there’s a valley between it. I didn’t see the valley before, and now I’m seeing the valley. I’ve got to get over there because I’m in constant state of discomfort. And wondering why I can’t move on with my life, and it was so easy for him to just pick up and go.

She is having a hard time allowing someone else to love her because she still feels intensely loyal to her ex, however, she recognizes that is “silly”. She says that she has hit rock bottom to get to this place now, however, she still tries to see the good in everyone.

Trusting Instincts. This is a subcode of ‘Self View- Post’ representing participants getting back into touch with themselves and allowing a renewed sense of trust in their own instincts. This may have been or continues to be hampered by the

events of the relationship. 16 participants spoke about reexamining their relationship to their instincts post-relationship.

All the participants who mentioned their instinctual selves in the aftermath of their relationships spoke about developing an increased trust and reliance on their “gut” feelings. Mia suggested that she is trusting her instincts more and they are helping her to keep appropriate boundaries, which in turn, makes her a more cautious person. Iris has been paying attention to her instincts and standing up for herself, despite her strong desire to keep the peace, especially with her former partner. “Trust my instincts is what I tell myself over and over now.” And she says that her relationship serves as a reminder to her to trust her gut. She says that the older she gets the more she has to remind herself, “your gut’s a good thing. You should listen to it. I learned to trust my gut. I learned absolutely 100% of your gut is telling you that something’s wrong, something’s wrong.”

Eleanor allows herself to trust what she feels, and she doesn’t try to rescue any relationships anymore. She says that she trusts when she’s hurt or angry and the person can either deal with that information as a gift that she is offering, or they can reject it. And it’s okay if they rejected because then she no longer then wants the relationship. She says that after the experience of the INT relationship she misses nothing now and is in touch with her instincts, “so, trusting yourself but I think it’s even more, being willing to trust yourself to the point that relationships that are not healthy for you are not good to stay in.” Diana is no longer willing to accept poor treatment from anyone, “but from that I learned that I definitely deserve more than that and to trust my gut and to never put up with something like that again. If I see a red flag, to listen to the red flag.”

Cecilia considers herself to be very intuitive. She says that she's listening to herself and she's honestly happy for the first time in her entire life. She said, "I feel like I'm living again, finally". Rita describes her intuition as a "superpower" that has come from being in a relationship with a narcissistic person, saying, "when it comes up, I can smell it". Her experience has made her more cautious or conscious of red flags.

Vanessa discussed that she needs to learn to listen to her own voice again and to hear her instincts. She still continuing to sort out "messed up feelings" and is getting in touch with them. She stated that she believed everything that was said, until she couldn't believe it anymore. She admits that she still not there 100% but emphasizes the importance of learning to trust one's instincts. Elise is likewise learning to trust herself but feels that there is a delay between the events and the voice of intuition. She admitted that to this day, she only catches her former partner's manipulations in retrospect, saying, "When I make the mistake of speaking to him and he pulls something, I get a niggling feeling. I go over the convo in my head a few times, until finally identifying what went down." She is now listening and acting on her instincts:

More yeah. It's still weird, there's still a delay. There's still a lot of self-doubt. I still feel like (less and less), but very much like every step I take could be me just being crazy, and I am blowing up my life. But there's something deeply flawed about me, and I just don't know when it's going to bite me in the ass. For me to be able to identify it and then say something about it took three times. But I don't let things pass anymore. When you have a feeling, protect yourself.

Strength and Resilience. This is a subcode of 'Self View- Post' and indicates a refusal to be responsible for pushback from the INT, feeling ok to be alone if necessary, pushing back on inequity or poor treatment, allowing oneself to be angry over poor treatment, holding less self-doubt, not defaulting to self-blame, allowing oneself to be louder, dropping the feeling of needing to hide, or allowing oneself personal growth. This code is woven through all the narratives in a multitude of ways and shows up in many of the other codes, however, some examples are listed below.

Robin feels that through the experience of her relationship she has learned that she has resilience. She feels that she did well coming out of the relationship can in comparison to how she could have felt because it didn't destroy her. Eleanor was proud of finally standing up for herself, when her "back was against the wall, I fought back". She thought to herself, "you're going to die from this or you're going to fight. I learned if I don't take care of myself, if I don't protect myself, if I don't fight for myself, there's literally no one who will." In hindsight Ruby realizes that she learned of her strength through her relationship, and that she's becoming stronger still. She said, "I am a survivor of this. I'm resilient. I'm a strong person". She has rediscovered all of her capabilities despite seriously questioning them throughout her relationship. Claire feels that she is able to be "louder now. Not hiding". Tara completed degree at night school with three small children, saying:

I'd always had ambitions to have further education. So, I chipped away at it, just a course at a time here and there while the kids were small. I guess on the positive

side, I learned about my own resiliency, and the ability to fight for myself never completely went away.

Some of the participants derived strength from having children and wanting the best for them. Dawn found that she was “stronger than I knew”. Sophia felt “the strength to overcome” once her daughter was born. Others spoke about the importance of a happy and well-lived life for their kids and their drive to provide that.

Jessica found strength through her breakup, and part of that came from the decision not to let him back in emotionally:

I don't have to let him in. If I let him in, then that's dangerous. But if I don't let him in, I'm safe. He doesn't have power over me anymore. I moved on from him.

I'm out. You don't get in here anymore. So, that sense of inner strength, I guess.

Ani found strength in simply vocalizing to her partner that she wanted a divorce. Post-separation, Megan was able to get in touch with her own power:

I think I recognized my strength. I would say I'm very strong emotionally, physically. I've segregated myself in a lot of ways, just recognizing that there's different parts of me. I grew a lot. I think my capacity to learn and do things under pressure and in very treacherous circumstances is undeniable. I think I gained a lot of confidence from that, despite having my confidence torn down.

Some participants, they were able to get in touch with their strength and resilience through the very challenging court proceedings with their former partners. For example, Iris had to self-represent against her former husband's lawyers because she no longer could afford lawyers' fees. She ended up doing well for herself. Ani also found “power”

in self-representing in court against her ex. Cecilia kept up her strength during her divorce process by doing things that allowed her to get in touch with power, such as feeling attractive through dating again, and particularly by fighting back in court:

I proved to myself during that time that I could do this. That I was a fighter, and I was going to stand up and show other women, who were going through divorces from a narcissist, that they can win. The whole stigma of you can't win against a narcissist, every article I read said you'll lose everything because a narcissist will not bow down. They will fight you until you are dead in the ditch. I wasn't going to believe that. So, in the last couple of years through that process got me to where I am now. I became a fighter. I realized I had so much more strength and so much more fight in me that I ever thought I could. I made myself very proud.

Asserting Boundaries. This is a subcode of 'Self View- Post' and represents new boundaries or former ones that are being implemented post-separation. This often happened as a response to learning from the relationship. Participants referred to being more mindful of caretaking roles in relationships, the need to speak up and challenge, moments where self-protection is needed, not making excuses or justifying away other's poor behavior, being ok to say 'no', having healthy limits to trust, giving oneself grace and forgiveness, and admiring personal characteristics that may have been taken advantage of. This code was also pertinent to 'Self-Focus' and is described in detail there.

In summary, for most participants self-views after the relationship were informed by examining positive personal attributes. While the scars of the relationship were often long lasting and may still be in existence to some degree, overall, participants were

feeling much more positive about themselves and their capabilities. They reported a new-found trust of their own instincts, uncovered strength and resilience, and have been implementing newly developed or past boundaries which honor their needs.

Wisdom: Participant Take-Away Messages and Learning

Participants had important messages that they embrace for themselves or that they wanted to convey to others about their experiences. The elements contained in the ‘Wisdom’ code are woven throughout many other codes as well, however, some poignant examples are below. These are ordered by participant, rather than concept to keep these narratives intact.

Claire stated, “You don’t have to save everyone”. Ruby’s advice is to, “guard your heart, don’t be so generous, don’t believe everything you hear”. Diana would encourage people to listen to their guts and know that no one deserves to be treated poorly in their relationship, no matter who you are. Tara would tell her former self to rely on herself more, to slow down, and not to jump into a relationship. She felt that she moved too quickly into marriage and having children.

Madeline felt that getting to know her partner before marrying him might have given her more insight into what she was entering and perhaps prevented the marriage entirely. Looking back, she felt that the relationship was not worth it. She has also learned that people will fill in the gaps when she doesn’t speak up and make her out to be whomever they want. She has become content within herself.

Robin realizes that it didn’t matter how she looked because her partner would’ve treated her the same way regardless. She uses her personal experience of the trauma to

help her with her work. She feels that she has had a uniquely negative relationship experience but understands that she can be okay in the aftermath. She wants people to understand that the experience of being with and INT is not all in their heads that it is a unique form of abuse. She feels that the term narcissist is overly used:

I don't know if it's a good thing or not, but I definitely feel a little bit skeptical when people come to me and they're like "My ex-boyfriend is a narcissist". Tell me about it, and then we'll see. Because I feel like that term is a hot term and it gets thrown around a lot. I think the research here is important to me because I do think it can devalue the experience that somebody actually goes through when compared to somebody just being "You're such a narcissist", because somebody is a little bit selfish. They're not the same thing. I think that that's really important. I want people who've had that experience to understand that it's not them, and it's not in their head.

Kyla believes that she should have paid more attention to family and friends. She would not let herself rely on somebody that way again. She mused that she had knowledge of emotional abuse yet was still a survivor of it.

Mia is tired of her ex-partner getting away with "bad behaviour", so she now refuses to engage. She has learned to trust actions and not words without follow-through. She believes that helping and court professionals need more training specific to emotional abuse signs, and narcissism in particular:

I've seen therapists who have been deceived by it because he's so good, or in the process of finding our parenting coordinator, we interviewed 12 people. I'd say at

least half of them thought he was perfect and charming, and he is. He comes across as that, but I think more sort of training and importance put on that end of it would be really helpful.

Megan believes that she would not be as skilled at her job and she is today without having had that experience, being able to identify it, and also come out the other side:

Then at the end when he started to, “eh, you’re used. You’re washed up. I don’t need you anymore. You don’t benefit me. I could do this without you now.” It was very easily that I was just trashed and belittled. It was very emotionally so bad. It was bad the whole way through. I learned a lot about myself... I guess to give yourself the appropriate amount of time to heal between relationships and from things like being the best for yourself before allowing yourself to get into relationships. Because if I had maybe been in a bit of a different situation when he came around, I might not have been as easy of prey. I don’t think I would change my life. I think that obviously it needed to happen, despite it being very hard and unpleasant and everything, I learned a lot. Not only about myself and relationships... more importantly, big things about, “What is the purpose of life, and how do I want to live my life? What are my values? What are noncompromisable things for me?” Even though those things can be really hard for me to do still, I think that there’s a lot going on process-wise in the back of my head. I definitely would not be where I am today without that experience.

Dawn now believes that it is important to find a reciprocal balance in relationships and realizes that extravagant generosity is not a good foundation for entering a relationship, it

is actually a red flag. One of her key learnings is discovering that some people are not worth being with, but not everyone is terrible. If she has to work incredibly hard at a relationship, then it is probably not a good thing for her.

Valerie feels that she is realizing what is important, and that there is no need to be subservient. She emphasizes the importance of trusting intuition:

I think that it's really important to trust your instincts. Trust those intuitions.

Sometimes you may not have the words to explain your thoughts and your feelings. Sometimes you may not have all the right answers. But if you feel that something is wrong, don't ignore those feelings. See if you can just isolate yourself, investigate these feelings.

If Ani could have gone back to talk with her former self, she would have told herself not to get married to her ex. Had she been presented with an alternative idea for how life was supposed to go, she feels that she may have made different and likely better choices:

I think I would have told the version of myself that being a relationship isn't everything. I think that there definitely was this part of me that... sometimes I call it "getting on the conveyor belt of life." Like "Okay, I graduated high school, so now I do a university degree. And then what's the next thing I've got to grab off the shelf when I'm on the conveyor belt? Oh, a husband. And now I got to grab a house and now a kid." It very much felt like that. I wish that someone had said, "You don't have to do this traditional life. You can do other things." And I don't think that anyone ever told me that. I don't think my mum or dad even considered

that was a possibility. I don't think I had anyone in my life that had done anything but follow the traditional path. And I wish someone had been there to say that.

Sophia realized that she would never get what she needed from her partner, and that she was still unsure after many years of what is actually behind the façade:

We didn't have to get here. You had a choice. It was seven years in the making. I realize that what I want from him, I'm never going to get it. There's no depth in our conversations. I don't know what kind of depth that he can actually have. I think if I could say to myself, "What's beyond the act?"

Dustin asserts that no one deserves abuse, and that it is important to get objective help when emotional abuse is present:

Even if you get married or something like that, the dynamics are a little bit different because you're living with the person right away but just don't lose sight of who you are. And get help. I'm not talking about family help or friends help.

They are not professionals but mental health professionals, go to them right away.

Jessica advises that everyone should know their own boundaries and how important abuse laws for coercive control in a relationship are:

Pay attention to what you know is okay for you. And try not to make excuses for people so much. If you're not sure, get out. [There is] a potential federal law to make controlling or coercive conduct in an intimate relationship a criminal offence. It's meaningful enough to me that I would support this party federally at my next opportunity.

Eleanor advises, "Trust what you see. Don't fight for a nonreciprocal relationship":

I would like to write an article about this at one point, I want to call my article “The missing chapter”. I believe that every marriage book needs to have a chapter before it saying, “If these behaviors are in your relationship, you need not to read this book. It will not go well for you.”

There was lots of red flags from our dating to our honeymoon and in hindsight, I’m like, “Wow, I can’t believe I didn’t see that.” I can’t believe it, but you don’t know what you don’t know. It falls outside our communal understanding.

If I don’t fight for myself, there’s literally no one who will. And if that people will just throw you back in the lion’s den until you work harder, pray harder, stick it out, have better boundaries. So, I think through all this with the other thing I learned is learning to trust and be in touch with how I feel and allow that to be the thing that guides me. So, if I feel angry, there’s probably a really good reason I feel angry. And the other thing I learned is that not all relationships need to be maintained. If I could have given myself knowledge, I would never have got into the relationship.

Cecilia feels that the most important thing to do after a relationship with an INT is to get the self back again. She hopes that there will be more information that comes out about how people who go through narcissistic abuse are victims who deserve validation, that the issue gets out there, and that people are able to get directed help for it:

I don’t think I realized how bad it was. If I had the views that I have now and I had the knowledge and the education that I have now through all of this, hell yeah I would have never married him. But I didn’t know.

I just want other [people] that have gone through this to be able to use every support that they can, that are healthy for them. Their friends, their family, the people that will do anything for them. To know that they're not alone in this. If I had been going through this without the support that I had and the knowledge that I had, I may not have survived it. I probably would have taken him back, really. And then, carried on in this toxic, dysfunctional marriage. And I just so badly want people that have gone through a relationship with a narcissist to know that they can come out on top, and they can live a normal life. And there's going to be challenges, probably more challenges than the average person who hasn't dealt with it would go through but to be able to recognize those emotions and like learn how to sit with them and you know, listen to themselves and kind of let it pass. They're emotions and they will pass. But to be able to know that there is a healthy life out there.

Nancy felt like she was taught that she was the one with the problem and she never wants her children to say similar words to themselves. She chooses not to let the events of the relationship consume her because she needs energy for herself. She tells herself, "You are capable, worthy of being happy. Don't be afraid of the unknown and of being alone. You have been doing it all alone". Also, "I don't want it to be I'm always the one at fault in the future. I don't want to not trust. I feel like that whole relationship taught me a lot of bad things about how to treat myself."

I don't want to forgive him. He chose everything that he did. He chose it because it was so bloody calculated 90% of the time. There's no way that he didn't have a

clue what he was doing. Especially towards the end and especially now. There's no way. So, in that regard to that whole thing, "Oh, you need to like dig deep and forgive." Fuck that. I'm not forgiving because this person is very calculated, and they know what they're doing. And I don't think that they're worth that. I don't need to spend any time on it. I don't need to forgive him and move past it. Open your eyes and trust yourself and know that you're capable. And 100% you're worthy of being happy, however that looks. And to not be afraid of the unknown, being alone. Not being afraid of having to do something on your own because news flash, you have literally been doing it on your own forever.

Una emphasized the importance really listening to a person's words:

Near the beginning, it was the first time we had a breakup a colleague at work heard, and I said, "I'm going to try and see if I can see him again." She looked me in the eye and she's like, "When he tells you what he tells you, hear him. Listen to him. Don't put a spin on it. Just really listen to him." And, I wish I had listened to her. I wish I had not seen it through the lens of possibility and seen it through the eyes of reality. Because I think he was showing his true colours at that point. And, I wish I had listened.

Wendy said, "I wish someone had told me when I was younger that you can take time to make decisions; it's better to do that. If something's going to disappear because you don't act quickly enough, it's not going to be worth it."

Brooke would encourage people to wait until they feel self-confidence and respect to get into a relationship, because a true narcissist's only way to feel good about themselves is to take power from others:

I think how the hell could that have happened to me? And then when you start realizing what narcissists are really good at, that it really isn't about me and my abilities. It was really about how good he was at what he did. If you think it's too good to be true go with your gut. If somebody really loves you, they're not going to be with you while they're still married. Have more confidence and respect in yourself to wait. If they really want you, they'll do the right thing. But nobody is worth waiting for, honestly.

When people are like, you're so narcissistic, it's not a term to be used lightly. I think it's a scary term. True narcissists make it their purpose in life to screw other people over. I don't think that they're intentionally going, "I'm going to hurt you". I think it's just innately in them. But being somebody in a relationship with that, there is absolutely no way to recognize that. And every single day you're being beaten down and beaten down, to be able to see it at the time. It really isn't about you. Because you don't have the capacity when you're in it to even recognize or appreciate it. It's crazy how good they are. It doesn't matter who you are or how smart you are. It has nothing to do with your level of education. It's a game. It's crazy to me how the legal system doesn't recognize narcissism as detrimental to the children. I find it very disheartening. If you don't have a true diagnosis with pen to paper, a judge is going to say, well it's just hearsay.

Rita posits that there are some things that simply aren't workable:

You can have all these conflicting feelings and confusing experiences. Certain behaviors are unacceptable. They are so beyond the pale you dare not excuse them away. On another very practical note, always have a backup plan. There were many, many times where I thought, "I just need to go for the night, but I don't have \$400 for a hotel room." I didn't have the friends with the spare bedroom. I will never be in that situation again. Ever. Ever. Ever. So, that level of isolation with a partner, never. Because if it goes sideways, you can't get a fresh breath of air to recalibrate yourself. You get to tell any abuser at any time to fuck off. No one will ever stop me again from saying, "This feels bad. You need to stop." I guess the message is you have to have bottom lines. Because it's such a slippery slope. I also made a mistake in talking too much and not behaving more. So, there should have been behavioral consequences countless times. I talked way too much. When someone shows you who you are, believe them. He was showing me who he was, but I was trying to talk it out because he was a lovely human being and I loved him.

We talk a lot about you can learn different skills, but can you actually learn empathy? I think maybe that should be taught as a bigger flag for someone. Because he's like me, he's a little lefty – he comes across as a likeable, approachable, accessible but I think empathy doesn't get enough attention. Can someone really understand and appreciate your point of view, even if they

disagree with it? He never did. Teach people how to pay attention to their gut, I would highlight that one too.

Morgan feels that one needs to respect their own sense of self-worth and that being sensitive is not a “wrong” thing. As well, information about dealing with a narcissist is important knowledge in relationships:

I would really educate myself on narcissism, people like that exist. Maybe that that knowledge would have helped. It’s about respecting yourself and self-worth and telling yourself that you matter just as much, which is something I have to remind myself every day. Because it’s so hard for me today to believe that I matter. That my existence is deserving of love and my existence is enough.

Elise spoke about tuning into to intuition and clues that might help to identify someone with a vulnerable subtype narcissistic partner:

I think just really deeply feeling the difference between comfortable and uncomfortable. Being super acutely aware of when I’m comfortable and when I’m uncomfortable. R: What do you pay attention to? P: Do I feel judged? Do I feel like I have to be different than I am? Look for someone who does a lot on her own. Or the husband dominates when he’s around. Like, she’s always doing the scut work and that he’s charismatic and better. He seems like super Mr. Humble, salt of the earth. But it’s, like, I’m the bitch. I’m the strident one. When someone’s being strident and the other person’s perfect, they’re suffering. There’s never a good man suffering with a strident wife. Watch for women who seem to do too much, who seem to be perfectionistic. If they seem to be too good to be

true, then there's something going on. I would never let anybody see. I think I would notice the guy who's too nice socially. Whose wife doesn't seem super happy, but he's such a great guy. And also, if I were a family member, I would look at the social circles that these people have. We had no common social circles. I think that's really important. My husband was highly isolative because he could never risk us having a social circle. Because that would mean that people saw us a lot more and that he would be found to be not the perfect one.

Mona warned about one early red flag that she would pinpoint:

He was so open with how much he cared for me. And there's terminology that you can put around that. I know the "love bombing" thing and things like that. Now if I saw that hopefully I would run. Back then though, it was, "If he loves me and cares about me that much, he's not going to leave me or screw me around," because you don't assume they're lying about that or that they really don't know what that means.

She said, "As all this stuff is happening in your relationship, there's other things going on in your own life" and there's things that would distract from the problems.

Dorian felt that he was so busy caretaking his partner that he did not set boundaries, which is something he now practices. He also stresses the importance of getting help through talking about what is happening that is problematic:

Now I don't even engage anymore. It's really difficult to not, because they know the buttons to push. Responding, not reacting. Observing, not absorbing. Because that's what they're looking for. They want a reaction from me.

I have no problem talking about it to anybody. They may think I'm weak or whatever by saying it. I don't think that at all. I think it's the exact opposite...there's no courage without vulnerability, man. When you're stripping down your stuff to the core, putting it all out there, that's courage. Not hiding behind your feelings or bottling them in. That's not courage at all. Just talk. And if it's not a safe space to talk about it with your partner, then it just has to get out. You can't bottle this stuff in. At the end of the day, we all deserve to be happy, and nobody deserves to be treated like shit, especially if you're trying to be open with them. Nobody deserves that.

Vanessa had this to say:

Give yourself permission to just accept where you're at. I'm learning to turn that around on myself. I don't know why I have a different set of rules for me. But I'm recognizing that. I would say that nobody has the right to make you give yourself in any relationship. So, if you stop being you and you've given up who you are and what makes you amazing and wonderful to please someone else, then the relationship is not worth it. It's not healthy. No one has the right to take somebody else's power.

Trust your gut, to trust your instincts. there's a gnawing voice inside of you... and it got fainter and fainter for me. But it was saying, there's something abusive about this. So, I just would encourage people to listen to that still small voice that's saying that you matter here.

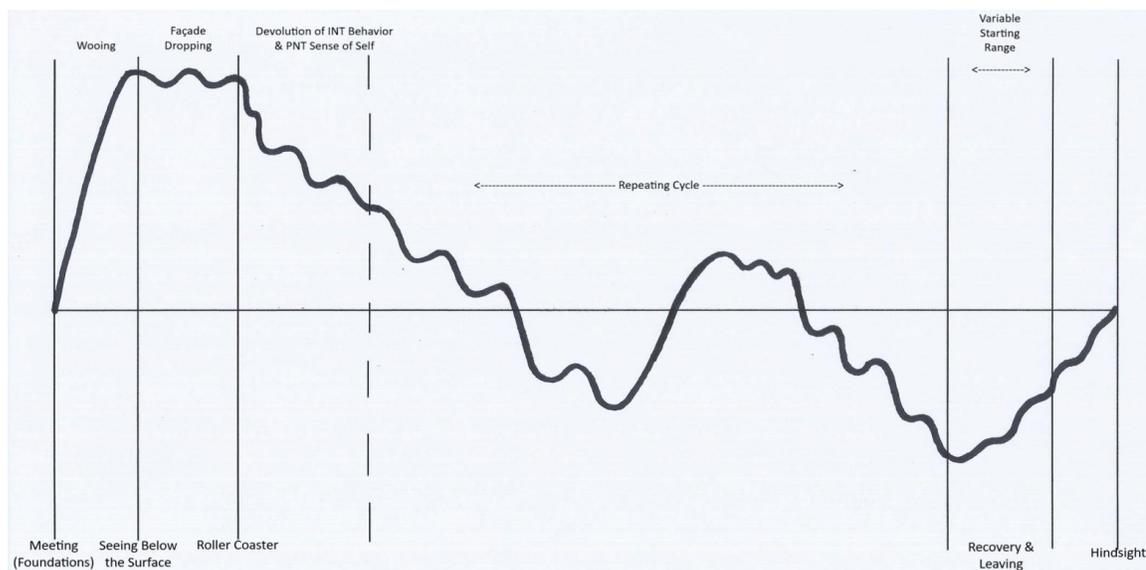
Iris spoke about the dangers of pushing aside one's instincts and the importance of learning about narcissism, saying, "People should know about and learn a checklist for narcissistic personality disorder":

I don't know why, [people] override their instincts. It speaks volumes. There's a reason why we have this built-in ourselves. Human beings are the only ones that override their instincts. You just want to be caring and loving, you can fix it, you're just a nurturing person and totally get taken advantage of. It's maddening.

She highlights the importance of never giving up financial independence in a relationship, "because you can't win when you're dealing with a narcissist. Never give up your financial independence."

Turning Points

The turning points are the pivotal moments in the story of the relationship that change the trajectory somehow. Some of the most important moments in the relationship trajectory are explained by the five themes, Foundations, Below the Surface, Roller Coaster, Recovery and Leaving, and Hindsight. These represent the initial wooing phase, where the PNT begins to identify red flags, the devolution of functional behavior and connection in the relationship cycled with wooing back, followed by the PNT gaining back some sense of self and the termination of the relationship, often in conjunction, followed by the ability to look back on the relationship with distance, time, and increased objectivity. Please see Figure 6 below for a visual representation of the PNT feeling states, including a sense of self, throughout the course of the relationship trajectory.

Figure 6*Trajectory of PNT Feeling States in a PNT-INT Dyad*

Note: Please see Appendix G for a larger scale version.

Main turning point across the stories include meeting the INT partner, making a deeper commitment to the relationship and/or increased dependence, including becoming exclusive, moving in together, getting engaged or married, pregnancy or having children, going back to school, getting a new/better job, having outside input and support, research or identification of behaviors through therapy, separation and/or court processes, distance and or space, and developing increased clarity.

It appeared that INTs consistently chose their partners because they were competent and had some form of status to offer, yet also were mainly agreeable, caretaking, and empathetic with some form of emotional vulnerability that would allow the INT to take advantage. INTs were able to mask their full selves for a time to draw PNTs into the relationship until such time as commitment or enmeshment occurred, both

logistically and emotionally. It was at this point that INTs seemed to gradually drop their façades, and began testing boundaries, apparently comfortable in the notion that participants wouldn't leave them. The enmeshment combined with a covert wearing away at participant self-esteem and self-worth through manipulation and other forms of emotional abuse paved the way for increased control in the relationship for the INT. It also created an environment in which the focus centralized around INT needs and wants, with punishment when not fulfilled, leaving participants' needs and wants behind, and likewise a sense of self. This ongoing devolution of behavior became cyclical in the relationships, wherein the participants would eventually pull away due to poor treatment, which was followed by love bombing and other incentives likely designed to keep the participants active in filling the INT narcissistic supply again. As many participants increasingly began to gain independence towards the end of the relationships, this seemed to be a positive catalyst for participants to leave or for the INTs to move on to the next shiny object of affection and leave participants behind. Vindictive behavior post-separation was very common, especially and universally, when the participants were the ones to end things. It was at this point that participants were able to truly focus on recovery, and for almost all the individuals in this research, although difficult, not a smooth road, and still ongoing for most, was highly effective.

Megan articulated that leading up to meeting her partner, she was in a vulnerable place because she had discovered that the career that she had been working towards was not what she wanted to do, which was “devastating”. She said that meeting her partner changed everything because this person saw something in her that was bigger than that

were different than that and she could see an opportunity for something different. She noticed that things started to take a significant turn very quickly after taking a trip together which was not far into the relationship. She started noticing that her partner might or might not acknowledge her existence in the relationship and would present himself in different ways depending on who was in front of him. She also observed red flags in his problematic behavior towards others:

The number of attempted lawsuits of defamation of character is astronomical.

“I’ll sue you for defamation of character. Don’t you dare talk about me.” No tolerance for anybody to shame his name or give feedback or criticism or anything, ever.

Likewise, Valerie started to notice some issues in her partner’s personal life including violent incidents with family, and she also began to get panic serious attacks. She started to realize that something was very wrong with her partner’s behavior and that panic attacks induced by a relationship are not normal, which prompted questions about the relationship. Jessica noticed about six months in, that her partners persistent wooing changed to the point of withdrawal, likely due to her partner’s security in her commitment. Iris noticed a major turning point for when things started to fall apart when her partner refused to participate in the household and when he began to keep a running tab on everything she was doing or spending.

Wendy described her partner as very open and affectionate which changed after she committed to the relationship. She confronted him about the change and felt that he thought he already knew enough about her and didn’t care to know anything more. A

turning point Vanessa noticed was when her partner became very successful and she said he stopped coming home, stopped paying attention, and stopped saying any of the things that he had in the beginning. He stopped bothering with affection once he “had” her.

Mia began to wonder about ending the relationship as soon as she moved in because she observed that her partner seemed to feel that he no longer needed to “woo” her since she was already invested. Dorian observed that once his partner moved in with him, she slowly started devaluing him more and more and their physical intimacy stopped completely.

Kyla observed a big change in her relationship once she became more dependent on her ex (at his behest) and more enmeshed, “So I quit my job, and that was really where things really started to turn. After that basically my entire life was just focused on him.”

Ani believes that two major turning points were her engagement and marriage. She said that she noticed that things were not good once she was engaged, and she started seeing some things that were red flags. However, it was once they were married that she really began to see that it wasn’t a good match, and she started to believe that she had to play a specific role in her partnership that wasn’t self-derived. Cecelia indicated that her partner only participated in common activities until they were married. He dropped the wooing façade after that point in conjunction with exhibiting an inflated ego due to financial success. Elise pinpointed that their activities together changed the “minute of engagement”. She said he wouldn’t do anything together like he did at the beginning when they were dating. Madeline felt that her partner had hidden himself until the point that they were married, “Oh, it was not what I signed up for. I felt like right after I

married him, all the colours came out. It revealed itself, and then I felt trapped because this is not what I signed up for.” Sophia also wondered if marriage had been a turning point for her relationship, “I don’t know if it was me, if it was marriage. He says that he doesn’t want to get married again. Maybe I ruined it for him. I have no idea.” Kyla stated that the second major turning point of her relationship was their marriage:

Things felt great before marriage and changed right after. After we were married, I think I lost more and more independence, and at that point I was sort of made to feel like the decisions weren’t mine to make. They were his to make.

Another turning point for Kyla came in finding out she was pregnant. She felt forced, at the time, to put school on hold and to follow suit with her partners plans for how the family was supposed to look. She had been on the verge of considering leaving as well. Vanessa had been considering leaving three years in but made the decision to stay because of her pregnancy as well. Mia felt that pregnancy was a turning point in her relationship because that was when her partner decided to begin an affair. Dawns partner began to more regularly lash out at her when she became pregnant and would tell her what a horrible person she was. She said that their activities together ceased at that point. The relationship turned for Eleanor once her first child was born because attention was no longer on her partner. At one point, her partner became furious that a phone call was being interrupted by their kids:

He was never like, “How are you doing? What’s going on?” You know, nothing. Just, “How dare you interrupt?” That was the first window that I went, “This is not normal. There are some chips missing. I don’t know what else I can do. I tried

everything. Something is going on but what? But what? But what?" Yeah, so that was an awakening. That moment of realizing it, nothing was ever good enough. For Mona, things got much worse in the relationship at the point of her pregnancy as well. She said that once their kids were born, her partner started cheating because he was no longer receiving the "red-carpet" admiration that he desired. "We had a really rocky five years probably. Ever since I got pregnant..."

Eventually, Kyla was able to convince her partner that it was a good idea for her to go back to work. She said that that was the point that her self-esteem began to increase, and she was able to identify what she wanted to do with her life. She also told her partner about not wanting to work for him anymore. She then realized that she couldn't be in the dysfunctional dynamic that she had observed in her partner's family of origin and that he was wanting to replicate with her. Towards the end of her relationship Vanessa started to reengage with her old career and started to remember the excitement of doing it. She felt that this started to bring elements of herself back and she said that is when, "the wheels started to fall off the cart", which led to a lot of fighting. Mia noticed that the power imbalance in her relationship started to become more equal with her gaining independence by going to school and through her work. She speculated that her partner began to cheat them because it was threatening to his ego:

I think there may have been a bit of a power imbalance. Around the time that he started seeing this other woman and things started to fall apart, I had gotten a better job. I was suddenly making more money than him. I had gone back to grad school so was therefore more educated than him, and I didn't have the time for

him anymore. I think that may have been the shift. I think taking that ownership over that part of my life... He always liked to control who I was around, and all of a sudden being in grad school, I think there were all sorts of fears in his mind and things that he could no longer control. That would be my guess.

Robin said that she began to put the pieces together of what was going on in the relationship through her education about two years into it. She was also gaining more independence and space towards the end by default because he was “doing his own thing” and not participating in the relationship with her. She felt that he was really “showing his true colours” by that point, and she began to recognize that she was not the common denominator to his unhealthy behaviour. She came to the realization that he felt that he couldn’t let her outgrow him, so he had to put her down, and try to control her more. Tara also indicated that she started to exercise some independence towards the end of her relationship. As well she said that meeting other people at school was validating, and that having space helped her to gain increased self-reliance. Sophia indicated that a major turning point for her relationship going downhill was the moment she started becoming healthier herself. Brooke began to identify that she was a shell of her former self, and that made her realize that it was time to get out. She also recognized that her partner had no intention of leaving his marriage. She felt she needed to get stronger and started doing things for herself like working out which brought her to a healthier place.

One major piece that helped Kyla towards leaving her partner was meeting someone who helped her to see her value. Likewise, Wendy met someone who she really appreciated and it “shone a mirror” onto her boyfriend, “because this person was just a

very good listener and all these things that reflected what my boyfriend wasn't like. So, I felt in a way that it gave me enough confidence to break up with my boyfriend". It was at that time she also felt like she started listening to her instincts. Near the end of her relationship Megan went out with a friend to work out together and something made her laugh. She said, "I stopped and then I started crying because I realized that that was the first time I had a genuine laugh in a year or two."

Gaining knowledge was a vital turning point for many of the participants. Madeleine had been told to go to therapy to fix herself which she did even though she didn't want to at the time. In the end her partner was upset that she continued through with counselling because it seemed to be offering a source of support and was a stabilizing factor that meant that she had a focus outside of the relationship. Ava began learning in therapy about the nature of her marriage, her family of origin, codependence, and narcissism. She said that it was from that moment on that instead of being more reactive she was more observant of how she was treated and what her partner's responses were. Morgan said therapy helped her to begin to detach from her partner to the point that she was able to walk out.

Madeleine felt that she broke the marriage by finally deciding not to hold back on her opinions and intelligence. Her partner's reaction to her calling him out was anger. She then realized that showing him that she was an intellectual equal was not okay in the relationship. For some, the end came because they found out about their partner's cheating. Valerie began to realize that problems in the relationship were not all her fault. Her partner's stories didn't add up and that finally let led to a confrontation. Ani's partner

screamed at her that she hadn't let him try when she finally asked him for a divorce, even though she had been trying for years to address problems. It was in that moment that she realized he was trying to manipulate her and to blame her as if she had failed in the marriage. She remembers feeling like she was connecting the dots and understanding that this is what her partner had been doing the whole time. She also realized through having some space away from her partner temporarily that being alone was not harder. Ava came to a moment where she grasped that there was too much damage for the relationship to work out, "He said to me, straight to my face, "I think you're full of shit." And that's when my world started spinning and I just had this sick feeling in my stomach, and I realized I could not do it." Likewise, Eleanor became aware that she simply could not meet her partner needs in the way that he wanted them met, that she herself had needs, and that she was simply too busy with childcare and work for his needs to be sustainable. Cecilia found that her partner's anger intensified post-breakup because she was no longer in service to his needs. Iris also felt a power shift after her separation. At one point when he was accusing her of always creating the conflict, she finally called him a narcissist to his face, which she had never done before:

I said, "Goodness gracious, a narcissist couldn't be wrong, ever. Do you remember when you did this, this, this, this, this." And, I said, "You keep it coming and I'll keep it coming. I've got plenty more. I'm sure [new partner] doesn't want to get a hold of this information." And then he said, "I think we need to cut this conversation off." Next thing you know, he paid his child support overdue payments and was just acting really nice.

She knew he felt the need to do this to impress the new woman he was wooing so he started to behave more reasonably after that point.

Discrepant Data

Discrepant data were noted relating to several the codes and was woven into the stories of each code report as a contrast or gradient to the narratives in the data analysis section. Data were considered discrepant when it appeared as contrary or unusual in terms of cross-comparison to other participant narratives. For those discrepancies that emerged as more unique and associated collective concepts, a code specific to the general group would be created. For example, alcohol misuse or gambling addiction in the INT partner was collectively listed under the ‘Addictions’ code because while different symptoms emerged, often the PNT experience and outcomes were similar to one another as another layer of the relationship.

None of the discrepancies that emerged were so far outside of the common narratives that they changed the trajectories of the relationships in a way that was vitally different, perhaps because of the high volume of participants and the ability to cross-confirm amongst diverse narratives. As well the majority of discrepancies were explained by circumstances relating to participant context and the various backgrounds and personalities involved in the dyads. For example, initially when some data began to emerge that not every INT partner was likeable and/or charming either initially or throughout, this contradicted the typical DSM 5 (APA, 2013) explanation of narcissistic behavior. However, as more data were gathered, it became apparent that specific contrasting behaviors occurred in cases where the participant reported that their partner

had more vulnerable subtype characteristics. In addition, the diverse spectrum of experiences and human behavior must be taken into consideration in these instances.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The maintenance of trustworthiness followed the proposed steps in Chapter 3 with the goal of maintaining transparency of process and to reduce subjectivity. The inclusion and justification for the trustworthiness elements employed is described in more detail in that chapter and is primarily based on methods recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), Korstjens and Moser (2018), and Shenton (2002; 2004).

Credibility

Credibility in this research was established using five approaches, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, member checking, appropriate saturation, and researcher qualifications.

In terms of prolonged engagement, initial direct contact was made with potential participants who inquired about the study via email, and all were given a pseudonym. Following the completion of the informed consent and screening tool, at least one phone conversation took place with every potential participant to discuss the nature of the study and purpose, to give information about myself, follow up with any clarifying details, to answer any questions participants might have, and to speak about next steps and mutual expectations. After a collaborative agreement was in place for ongoing participation, a 90-minute interview was set up. Participants were invited to email at any time for questions, comments, or concerns. Checks for understanding and ongoing consent happened at each stage. These initial contacts served to increase comfort and confidence

for the interview process and to begin to develop a rapport. During the initial interview process in a private and neutral location or via Zoom, interviewees were reminded that they did not have to answer anything they didn't want to, could leave at any time, and that I would strike anything from the transcript that they would like with the hopes that interviewees would feel comfortable to proceed with openness and honesty. Participants have been updated at all stages of progress of the research, and several participants sent updated or additional information post-interview of their own volition.

Extensive notes were taken during each audio-recorded interview, and post interview concepts and reflections were handwritten by me following each participant's session. These initial impressions formed the framework for later coding and eventual cross-comparison as more participant interviews were conducted. As each transcript was produced in the weeks after each interview, initial readings for comprehension and a broader understanding took place before the first open coding was conducted. Transcripts were continually reviewed, and recoded as new transcripts were created, and coding definitions were refined. Codes were storyboarded into categories and themes in the later stages of these reviews, continually being adjusted with new data points. Cross-comparison matrixes were completed, including participant and partner characteristics and behaviors to further refine the code information in an effort to achieve persistent observation.

Triangulation occurred through the process of interviews with a diverse group of people who happened to have experienced the same phenomenon. Because of the relatively large number of participants included, corroboration of findings and consistent

confirmation of narratives was possible. In-depth interviews were conducted using the same semi structured interview guide (Please see Appendix A) which was based on the research question and sub-questions. Secondary data from the screening tool was used for participants who did go through to the interview phase which often confirmed or added to interview assertions, as well as provided contextual and demographic information. Data were cross analyzed for patterns, commonalities, and differences to help lead to categories and themes. Data were also compared with existing research for corroboration or counter-findings, which was folded into the final analysis of each code.

In addition, there is a natural form of peer-review which occurs during the dissertation process in which the Chair, Second Committee Member, University Reviewer, and IRB board. At each stage of the evolution of this research, content and methodology is questioned, requiring ongoing focus and justification from an objective standpoint. This has assisted to provide expert best practices and external perspectives on the data and analysis, which also challenges any exiting biases and assumptions.

Aside from the interviews themselves, the most collaborative process was through member checking. After each transcript was complete, participants were sent a copy of their transcript and a 1–2-page summary of their own data for review, which included applicable loose codes, categories, and emerging themes. All but a few participants responded, in all cases with positive feedback confirming accuracy. In one case, a participant asked to have a specific quote removed because they felt it was too identifying, which was then redacted from any ongoing mention. Approximately half of the participants continued dialogue in terms of additional information, which appeared to

be prompted by the member-checking procedures. One follow-up interview was conducted at the participant's behest. Aside from additions to the interview transcripts, no material changes were needed because of member checking.

To achieve content validity, saturation was determined to occur at the point that no significant unique contributions could be made by further collection. The codes changed and the list grew rapidly, slowing by approximately the 14th participant. It was at this point that the coding and categorization was only being readjusted occasionally, until very few to no changes seemed to appear by the twentieth participant. Nine additional participants were interviewed to increase triangulation and to confirm saturation. Many more individuals were willing to participate, however, I determined that considering saturation had well been established, for the purposes of this study and resources available, participation was closed at 29 participants.

I have been trained at a master's degree level and have been practicing as a Registered Clinical Counsellor for a decade and a half in private practice, crisis support, and at a supervisory level. One of the main focuses of client work has been with couples and relationships, which is directly applicable to this research. Some theoretical and practical experience in this subject matter was developed during this time. The requirements for this field include rapidly building rapport and trust with people who are sharing vulnerable information, and knowledge in conducting an interview with a focus on eliciting an individual's narrative. Pattern recognition is an important skill set for this work, and salient data points must be observed and explored on a regular basis in each client session. These have been important transferable competencies for this research.

Transferability

The research in this study is qualitative and, therefore, cannot be directly transferable to other populations, however, every effort was made to provide the reader with thick descriptions of participant experiences, participant and partner behavior, and the participant context, including their stories of meeting their partner, and who they were at the time, as well as throughout the duration of the relationship to the time of the interview. The data analysis included a heavy emphasis on verbatim quotes, with deep examination of the factors which may have contributed to the lead up for any reported feelings, behaviors, and outcomes.

The research methods and processes have been described in detail so that readers can assess the applicability to their own situations or research. As Korstjens and Moser (2018) recommend, research context was provided in terms of comprehensive information about setting, sample, strategies, demographic, clinical characteristics, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and interview procedures and guide. Whenever possible in the data analysis, existing research was referenced and compared as a knowledge framework. Detailed descriptions were included regarding the concept of partnering with an INT set against the background of participants' diverse contexts, and thematic elements were highlighted in participant's stories, both as individuals and cross-compared. This should allow the reader to grasp understanding of the experiences of participants as individuals and as a group over the course of their PNT-INT relationships, and to assess where elements of the research are transferable.

Dependability

This research relied on consistent procedural approaches and data management (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) which have been documented in other sections, and importantly reviewed by procedural experts via Committee Members and other involved Walden faculty and staff. Protocol steps, notes, including reflective, and decision justifications were documented and updated once a week to my Chair for feedback. Participant interviews and questions, transcriptions and member checking, reflexive notes, and analysis, including continual codebook review, for example, were all treated with the same procedural steps each time to maintain strong consistency across time and participant. With the details included in other sections, readers should have the ability to replicate study conditions with ease.

Confirmability

I was cognizant throughout the research process to continually examine preconceived ideas and assumptions, and to revert to an openness-stance when hearing or reviewing data. This included maintaining a high level of alertness to contrary or unusual data. Interpretations were examined against a backdrop of existing research, reflexivity notes, and other participant data to ensure accuracy of interpretation.

I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the entire data collection and analysis process, making entries in response to initial impressions of the subject matter and worldview, research, best practices and procedures, the data collection process and content, post-interview reflections, and data analysis, including coding-specific subject matter. These entries might include assumption-based concepts, observations that struck

me, comparisons and changes made to the initial lens, and how all of this impacted the research and choices made along the way. Importantly, the entries made it possible to examine how preconceived ideas measured up in practice via the verbatim data and made it possible to challenge self-held stances during each segment of research.

Results

RQ: What are the experiential narratives of former partners who have been in a long-term relationship with an individual who exhibits narcissistic traits, from meeting to post-termination?

While each participant and their journey were unique, there were an extraordinary number of commonalities between experiences related to the narcissistic characteristics of their partners. It is important to consider as well that in circumstances where the participant did not give information relating to a particular code, it is entirely possible that they had a similar experience that made less of an impact for them personally or did not fit into their narrative at the moment of interview.

From a chronological perspective, participant narratives typically began with the story of their personal context leading up to meeting their partners. In the descriptions of themselves, participants all gave information around school, work, and other achievements. This information was given very matter-of-factly, however, it became apparent that participants were universally on their way towards relative success or already successful, despite multiple barriers for many of the participants. Those who were in their 20s or beyond were self-supporting. Some participants believed that their success and competence may have been an attractant for their partners.

Interestingly, not all participants were drawn in by their partners at first, in some cases, they expressed active dislike. Megan underscores her feelings by describing that her partner was, “very grandiose. He’d wear sunglasses inside and all the spiky hair and I’m so awesome demeanor and walk and talk like that. And I was really put off by him.” Generally, however, these latter participants also reported more vulnerable subtype characteristics in their partners. While most saw their partners as charming or captivating, some PNTs were attracted to their partners seemingly “nice”, “deep” or “salt of the earth” image instead.

INTs were often relentless in their pursuit of participants and raised them up on a pedestal initially with intense praise, compliments, and other forms of attention. PNTs often spoke about feeling truly “seen” by their partners and of how compatible the INTs appeared to be with their value systems for romantic relationships. There was a sense from many of the participants that their partners were observing them keenly and had a skill in spotting specific meaningful things about them that others did not, or that were uniquely important to the participant. In hindsight, most participants felt that this behavior was strategic to ensnare them. Some participants expressed that they felt the INT was motivated to be with them longer term by the desire to appear with a certain image and to take advantage of the service or financial situation of the PNTs.

INTs were often able to present themselves initially as markedly more stable, capable, and empathetic than they actually were, which was not sustained over time. Their partners often seemed like the ideal person for them and was astute enough to woo them in meaningful ways. Many participants spoke of or alluded to the high level of

“fun” or excitement that they had in these early stages. Because of the high emotional intensity of the initial stages of the relationships, they generally tended to move quickly in terms of the investment that the PNT was willing to contribute to the dyad. This was unusual behavior for many of the participants. Some INTs demonstrated long-term persistence to get to that place with their partner, who may have been dating other people when they first met or otherwise unavailable, which was flattering for participants. This behavior often seemed to be linked to winning over the participants who initially disliked their mates and it appears that initial persistence led to relationships that may never have happened otherwise.

However, it was not long into most of the relationship trajectories, where a devolution of INT behavior tended to occur, coupled with a gradual erosion of self-esteem and sense of self for the participants due to emotional abuse. This turning point tended to coincide with the increased commitment of the participants to the relationship, suggesting that the INTs felt “safe” to begin to show their “true colors” to the participants and to drop their façades, at least in private.

Some of the participants were already suppressing intuition about red flags by this point in the relationship, and all except three participants were seeing seriously concerning red flags within the first half year, generally within two to three months. There were a few participants who were willing to admit to themselves early on that something was very wrong, but either did not know what to do with the knowledge or how to express it. This phenomenon made it harder for participants to clarify how they felt about the situation or what they should do about it. Related to this, participants’ inner

instinctual self was seriously eroded, and many expressed that trusting the inner self is still difficult to date.

An example of the earlier signs of impending emotional abuse is something that has been colloquially referred to as “negging”, wherein the INTs would use backhanded compliments to undermine participants’ self-confidence. For some, this began right from the first date, however, often it was a bit further into the relationship and would replace the love bombing over time. Participants now realize that this was a hint into their partners’ abusive nature. Gradually, as the PNT-INT partnerships continued, the focus would begin to change to a less balanced perspective so that the PNT needs and wants were no longer a concern in the dyad.

In current research, it is understood that partners are seen as a means to fill up the INT’s narcissistic supply with admiration and services, and as long as participants showed no needs of their own, the relationship could run with some stability. Some participants indicated that this appeared to be as addictive as a drug to their partners, and that they were meant to feel worthless when they could not supply it. Some attributed this to a need for superiority, power, and control. The dynamic in all the narratives turned to servicing the INT, likely because of the tendency of PNT agreeableness and caretaking natures, as well as the gradually increasing emotional abuse, which in turn continued to erode self-confidence and self-esteem. This served to shift participants boundaries and was often extremely subtle in nature, however, increasing in overtness as time went on in the relationships. Almost all participants observed a marked imbalance in the emotional,

relationship, and household labour, with them feeling that they were carrying significantly more than their partners, in many cases, almost everything.

Participants began to observe at this stage that there was a cycle of great highs and great lows in the relationship related to wooing and emotional abuse, in some cases pushing the couples to break up or distance multiple times throughout the relationship. Most participants mentioned that they had been considering leaving their partners throughout the relationship from early on, many of them creating plans for years. The push-pull of the relationships was linked by participants to a feeling of being on continual unstable ground with their partners and the relationship. Because their partners reactions and behaviors could be unpredictable, many participants would “walk on eggshells” so as not to upset the delicate balance of the household or to avoid reactivity.

Anxiety and confusion were also mentioned in conjunction with uncertainty created by their partners dramatically shifting moods and behaviors. Participants had difficulty relaxing into the relationship or trusting that they would have safety in doing so after experiencing criticism, anger, or withdrawal over seemingly innocuous or strange reasons. For some of the participants, they would have trouble with physical symptoms such as feeling like they could not breathe properly, or developing panic attacks, for example. Many of the participant experienced confusion over what had happened to the partner who had once been so loving and attentive. Since their partners were actively promoting the concept that PNTs were the ones doing things wrong, many of the participants began to feel less competent, worthy, and that they should be trying harder.

Many of the participants indicated that their partners deliberately tried to keep them off balance as a form of control and to keep them working for the INT needs.

Controlling behavior in the relationships began equally as subtly, but perhaps more slowly over time for most participants than some of the other negative conduct. For the participants who recalled feeling controlled by their partners, often they would be attuned to “suggestions” or even expressions of opinion which artfully communicated ways that the participants should be behaving. As is typical in other forms of abusive relationships, participants felt more controlled over time by their partners and the behaviors by the INT would become more overt as the power balance shifted. Often because of the subtle exertion of controlling behaviors, participants felt that unspoken rules and expectations were required of them to maintain the harmony of the partnership and that they alone were responsible for this equilibrium. Several PNTs suggested that they believed manipulations of this sort were regularly strategic and could involve setting the stage for long-term goals as opposed to wanting something in the immediate moment.

“Gaslighting” and the use of underhanded humor were methods of challenging participants’ perception of reality and served to make them question themselves and how they operated in the world. Participants would regularly be told that their understanding or memory of something was wrong, and often this would be cloaked in “helpful” styles of commentary or slight condescension designed to show them a “better way”. Some participants recounted their partners making jokes at their expense with putdowns and criticisms being disguised as good-natured fun or affection. This was also a method used to discredit participants in front of others to reduce PNT credibility and to bolster the

INTs superior façade over the PNTs. When participants would object, they would be told that they were “taking it wrong” or were “too sensitive”. In addition, participants were devalued in other ways, including given backhanded compliments, being treated as an inconvenience, or ignored in front of others.

Over half of the participants were name-called, especially when they tried to push-back at their partner’s treatment, and a special favorite was the term “crazy”. This was either openly said or implied, often leading to increasing self-doubt for participants. A common condition of the relationships was that blame would regularly be twisted so that the INT could position themselves without accountability, meaning that whenever something went wrong, someone else, often the PNT was to blame. Because of convincing INT arguments, gradual grinding down PNT sense of self-worth, and PNT willingness to give benefit of the doubt and to take responsibility for their actions, PNTs would usually find themselves having difficulty challenging INT assertions that they were the problem in any given situation. This led to feelings of frustration and confusion.

Some participants reported being scrutinized, often on minutiae or random criteria, which appeared to be a double-standard, and an ever-changing goal post for achieving satisfaction. This scrutiny led to increasing self-beliefs that participants were never good enough, and that they would continue to have to try to prove themselves. Some of the participants spoke about such extreme confusion about their own perceptions that it was like being in the “Twilight Zone”; what they perceive to be up is actually down because they were constantly being challenged with such conviction by their partners. In turn, because any problems in the relationship were blamed on the

participants, INTs could then step into the role of the savior or victim. All the participants reported that their partners would never take responsibility or accountability for problems, or to try to do better for the relationship.

Financial control and entitlement turned out to be one of the more unexpected codes when it appeared. This was not an element of abuse that has been previously widely linked to narcissistic relationships in academic literature or other resources yet appeared in two-thirds of the dyads. It is perhaps not surprising based on the DSM 5 (APA, 2013) criteria of entitlement for an NPD diagnosis, however. Some of the participants reported traditional control methods, such as limited or no access to household funds and requirements of one-sided reports of spending, however, narcissistic traits appeared to play a specific role in the way that money management happened in the dyads as well. For example, many participants noticed that their partners would have no problem spending common funds or even that which belonged exclusively to the PNTs on their own extravagant or irresponsible purchases. Some participants were required to support the household with very little contribution either financially or in household participation from their INT partners, while at the same time being devalued as a partner. In seven of the dyads, debt was a common feature as created by the INT, often requiring the participants to work to create solutions regularly by themselves.

Over half of the participants spoke about unusually heightened or random conflicts with their partner, which often appeared indirect at first and became more overt hostility towards the end of many of the relationships, increasing in frequency as well. In more subtle versions, many of the INTs would use punishment as a form of manipulation

to get their own way by either withdrawing affections, ignoring, or literally leaving, as well as becoming demonstrative towards others instead of participants.

When more subtle forms of conflict didn't work or INTs were no longer bothering to mask behavior, intimidation, aggression, or sliding into rage occurred. In some of the cases, there were hints of implied potential for physical violence or violence towards pets through body language or "jokes", random threats suggesting what the INT "could" do, and property damage. Participants who related to the codes and sub-codes under Conflict universally discussed a worsening over time of these events and a feeling of unpredictability and of being controlled. Seven participants also reported at least one incident of physical violence. The resultant sensation from these emotional and physical events was an ongoing impulse that participants felt of "walking on eggshells" so as not to upset their partners or to set off a "time-bomb".

With the difficulties now presenting themselves in the relationships and the changing self-views that participants were experiencing, almost all reported feeling a sense of isolation from loved ones and from other facets of their lives. In some cases, this was purposefully caused by their INT partners as a form of control, however, often this was due to other people not wanting to be around INTs. Jealousy followed by rage was used at times as a form of control which served to isolate certain participants from supports or usual activities, indicating possessiveness or objectification of participants. It was observed that several dyads moved at least once, in some cases, multiple times, which also contributed to a sense of participant isolation for some. Some participants didn't come to the realization until the end of the relationship that isolation was a

strategic tactic of control. Around this time, many of the participants were noticing a lack of support from loved ones due to the aforementioned issues, however, participants also described an element of shame that they felt about their relationships, or a belief that they should protect their INT partners, which prevented them from openly sharing with others. Additionally, well over half of the participants either felt that people would not be able to understand what they were going through or that they would not be able to adequately explain what was happening. The main reasons cited by participants for this fear of a lack of understanding from others came from the way that their INT partners would present, often charming or likeable, that there was no concrete evidence to offer, and that the negative events were series of cumulative things that added up to a pervasive and abusive whole, rather than discreet incidents that could be definitively pinpointed with ease. In turn, this isolation and self-isolation created a downward spiral of increased remoteness as the relationship continued. Some participants did have loved ones who stayed close to them during this time, and there were a few family members or friends who were open about what they were seeing, however in more cases supports did not reveal the extent of their concerns until the relationship was over. The increased isolation allowed for greater ease for manipulating and controlling PNTs as there was less opportunity to measure INT behavior against alternative perspectives.

Some additional means that were mentioned by participants which served to reinforce INT manipulations included regular lying, cheating, and enabling by others. Lying was done by INTs to suit their needs in a moment, however, did not always have an identifiable purpose. In some cases, it appeared to be a form of entertainment for the

INTs' benefit. Unfortunately, the outcome of this was that participants further questioned their own perceptions and understandings and were made to feel "crazy" at times because of the sublimation of instinct, especially when they suspected their partners of cheating. More than two-thirds of the INT partners cheated to participants' knowledge, most multiple times, which was associated with a great deal of the lying behaviors. In many of these situations, cheating became more overt as the participants were feeling more enmeshed in the relationships, and some participants speculated that this was a testing of their boundaries so that INTs could determine how much they could get away with or to attempt to purposefully cause jealousy.

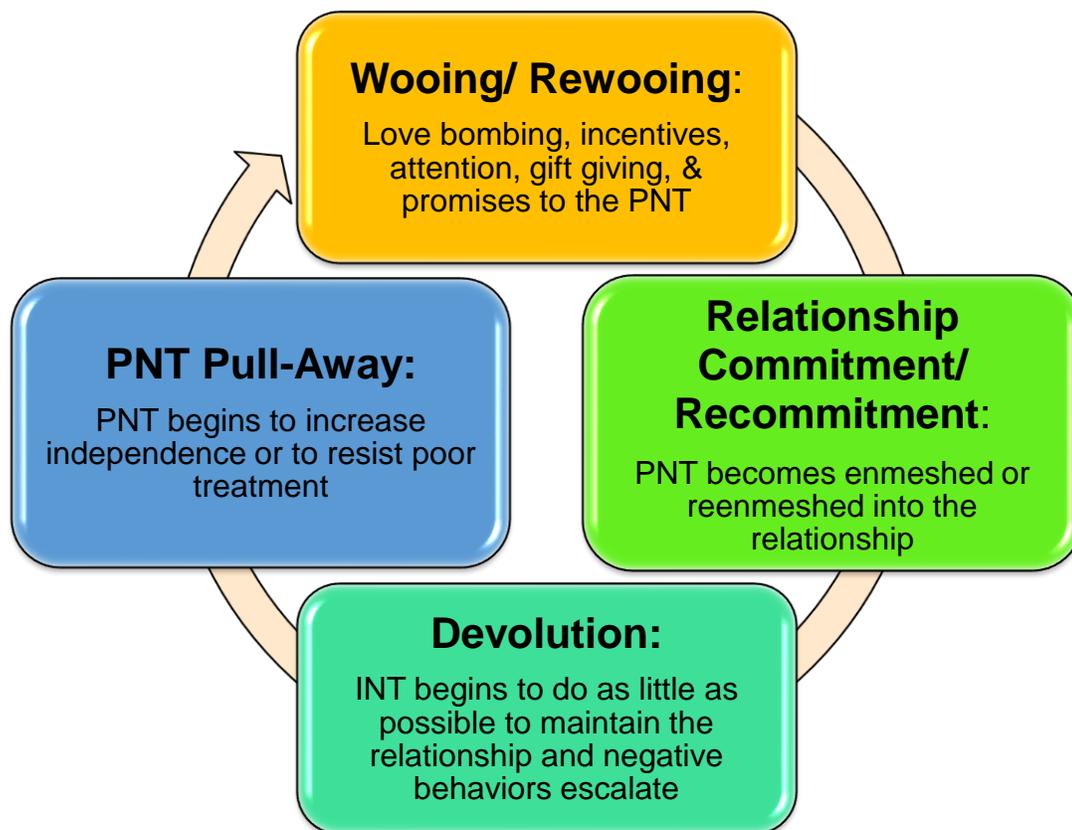
In popular culture, the term "flying monkeys" has recently been associated with narcissistic people, in that they tend to surround themselves with people who will support their whims, even to the detriment of others. In this study, this was observed in some relationships, and often it was the INTs' family members, which seemed to have a widespread impact on the participants and relationships when it occurred. Participants wishes and sense of stability or reality were thrown into question or overshadowed by people who were imbued with a greater sense of credibility because of the dynamics created by the INT and enablers. This led to a feeling of being ganged up on or increased acceptance of INT perspectives as the correct ones and thus, participant perceptions being wrong.

About half of the relationships were complicated by INT issues of addiction, mental health, or sexual. Based on narcissistic criteria such as entitlement, lack of empathy, and associated comorbidities, this is not surprising data, however, it may have

been a factor in confusion around how to pinpoint the root of the INT problematic behaviors and participants' roles and expectations within the relationship.

In hindsight, most participants recognized that when they would begin to pull away from the relationships, INTs would begin a process of rewooing. Seemingly, INTs would skillfully identify how they could do the bare minimum to maintain the relationship, adjusting with changing information. Usually, one of the tools to maintain would be giving participants excuses so that they could justify or deny away any negative or suspicious behaviors. This would often be paired with promises or incentives for a beautiful future together, painting an image that was knowingly appealing to participants.

Interestingly, in some cases, INTs focused too much on material or status-based items that they believed would interest their partners, not realizing that what would motivate themselves to stay in a relationship did not have the same pull for participants. Perhaps what was most effective was the renewed love-bombing and attentive behaviors (similar to the initial stages) that would occur in these moments. Some INTs would also acknowledge their poor treatment of participants, and in rare cases, apologize for it, revealing an awareness of the effects on their partner and the strategic nature of many of these behaviors. Several participants alluded to the cyclical nature of this wooing tactic.

Figure 7*Wooing- Rewooing Cycle*

This cycle by nature, required participants to suspend their instinctual feelings that may have been giving messages about the lessening functionality of their relationships, thus resulting in giving INTs the “benefit of the doubt”. This was perhaps aided by their agreeable nature, in addition to past models of lower relationship functionality or trauma in some cases. Many participants spoke about giving their partners more credibility than themselves at this stage. Often there was the hope that the INT partner would return to the person that participants understood them to be from the initial stages of the relationship, sometimes paired with the belief that one stood by a partner no matter what.

Over half of the dyads attended couples therapy to work on their relationship and in all cases, participants felt it was ineffective because of their partner's inability to accept accountability for their role. Some felt INTs were able to mask their narcissistic behaviors while in sessions and stressed that couples' therapists should focus on the symptoms explained by partners to assist in uncovering dyadic narcissism, such as lowered self-esteem, shrinking, uncertainty or confusion, and other of the identified codes that are referred to in this research. Taken in combination, these symptoms may shed light on the PNT-INT dynamic. When a therapist was able to label the term narcissism for participants, this reportedly made a great deal of positive difference for healing.

Resistance points occurred throughout wherein participants pushed back against their INT behaviors; however, it was observed that the focus of the majority of resistance narratives occurred toward the end of the timelines. Some highlighted that they were willing to resist at the beginning but worn away over time. Resistance often occurred in conjunction with increased clarity regarding the relationship dynamics and participants' independence. Most participants suggested that resistance happened in stages, with scaffolding built along the way for emotional and logistical safety being established as greater resistance occurred. Main forms of resistance included identifying partner inconsistencies and lies, using humor, protecting the self from manipulation or emotional entanglement in a moment, refocusing on the self, creating independent logistic and financial stability, and communicating expectations regardless of expected reactions.

At the ending period, particularly for those participants who had made the choice to leave, there was a marked increase in conflict. Those who did choose to leave as well

as some PNTs who had been contemplating it had put “escape” plans in place long before vocalizing unhappiness to their INT partners. Some INTs tried to convince participants that they were unstable, making poor decisions, and tried to say and do all the “right” things to reverse the breakup indicating an awareness of their poor behavior. A catalyst for several was cheating behavior on the INT’s part, which either prompted PNTs to end things or enabled the INT to transition to someone new. Only eight participants did not experience vindictive backlash during separation. Meaningfully, all except one PNT who initiated the breakup was subject to increasingly frightening or tumultuous forms of abuse and harassment, often through the court system or their children to do so. In some cases, this went on for years or is still ongoing to a certain degree. Some INTs continued to surveil participants after their breakup, to the point that a few had to change all their contact information and keep it secret. Because of the events of the relationship and this aftermath, almost half of the participants reported having trauma reactions, sometimes well after separation. These ranged from serious emotional and physical responses when seeing the former partner or being reminded somehow to avoidance. As many participants pointed out, this trauma will never fully go away.

Even before the relationships were over, many PNTs began their coping and recovery journey. As previously mentioned, in some cases this may have been the catalyst for the ending of the dyad. At the time of the interviews, all but two reported that they felt they were in a better place than when they were in the relationships. Some began to realize that they were not getting what they needed from the relationship and had lost too much of themselves. This prompted a renewed sense of getting back in touch with

who they were as people and rediscovering or finding ways to build themselves back again. A major part of this was recognizing that strength and resilience played a role after all, and that the messaging about “flaws” was a false narrative. Participants came to recognize that what they were told were weaknesses are actually strengths.

At the root of some of these realizations was that participants began to give themselves permission to reengage with personal-focused activities and self-care, which they may not have previously given space to while focusing on partners’ desires. Therapy helped almost all participants to identify feeling-states, and that events of the relationship fit a narcissistic pattern, thus providing support and validation. At times, this help included medication related to the anxiety and stress of the relationship or other untreated concerns. Through the therapy process or of their own volition, most participants began to research their partner’s behaviors, which also helped to come to a place of clarity in terms of what was happening and to reframe their own roles in the dyad. Often this information was validating in the sense that participants could begin to release ownership of much of the “fault” for problems as well as the sense of never being good enough.

Through research and therapy, labelling specific behaviors and events provided a framework for understanding the relationship, their partner, and themselves more clearly. For some, language had previously been missing for how to describe what had been happening and how they were feeling. Self-examination occurred in conjunction with participants contemplating their decisions within the relationship and the larger structure of belief systems which nudged them towards that specific relationship or partner.

Many of the participants began reclaiming their sense of independence before the end of the relationship, which appears for many to have been a subconscious attempt to distance themselves from the relationship in favor of self-preservation. In a few cases, this was a deliberate attempt to create scaffolding to leave the relationship. The exposure to external ideas and personal validation through work, school, and activities served to promote increases in self-esteem and occasionally more personal financial security. Several the INT partners reacted badly to this new-found independence and either turned to minimizing and manipulating participants, wooing back, or towards the end, breaking up with them likely due to the ego threat.

Most participants suggested that they have learned from the experience in a positive way and will take forward knowledge on giving and partnership without self-sacrifice and the loss of the self. The wisdom gleaned from the experience has allowed for acceptance of the idea that the dyad contained emotional abuse because of the narcissistic tendencies of their partners and that it is ok to release themselves from certain emotional responsibilities that they may have been carrying. For around half of the participants, a positive outlook allowed for applying knowledge and a sense of looking forward to the future. At times, this included establishing a new and functional routine that provided structure going forward. Importantly, most of the participants gave examples of how they now establish emotional or relationship boundaries in a way that they may not have before. Often it was the implementation process for boundaries that was previously most difficult, and the new tools learned through trial and error, research, therapy, and other forms of support assisted with this. This implementation often

included a new sense of understanding that it is ok to lose some people from one's life and gaining the ability to prepare for this possibility.

Around half of the PNTs discussed modelling, either for their children or through mentorship of some kind as a factor in coping and recovery. Parents were wanting to provide healthy examples of relationships to their children and, therefore, were motivated to make changes because of that, and in turn, having children gave them more confidence and strength. As well, participant also found meaning in giving support to others. For many this was through "helping" careers or volunteer activities, however, several now feel uniquely able to help those who have or are experiencing narcissistic damage.

Also, in the aftermath of the breakups, an important part of recovery was the ability to put down the emotional burdens of the relationship through release. Participants describe the end point as a moment where they let go of stress and anxiety that they didn't fully realize they were carrying, and for some it felt like a new chapter could begin. Journals, documents, emails, texts, and recording helped participants additionally to make sense of the events of their relationship and to gain more clarity on the subtleties of the emotional abuse. These items allowed participants to identify patterns and to piece together concrete events of the relationship that did not feel functional. Once these patterns were identifiable, participants realized that there was some predictability to their partners behaviors and that many of them were not the product of a person who was wired to think in a way that they would organically expect. This was another component that allowed participants to put down their sense that all was their fault and to mitigate damage from any further contacts.

Various forms of proof of their partners' behaviors were also helpful in the court process for those who were faced with that post-separation. It became clear from most of the narratives that participants believed that their partners were happier when PNTs felt somewhat damaged or lesser-than, so that the INT could "fix" them or feel superior and central. If that feeling did not exist for the INT, they would act in a way to suppress participants. This narrative partially formed from some participants who could see similar patterns in the INTs' choice of past or subsequent partners.

Having space from the relationship and the INT proved to be one of the crucial strategies for coping and recovery. Many of the participants distanced themselves logistically, including moving or blocking their former partners from contacting them. This appeared to be done out of a sense of desperation to preserve the self. In some cases, participants spoke about actively "blowing up" the relationship so that there would be no temptation or hope of rekindling things. This space allowed for additional gains in reflection and clarity about the relationship and a sense of great relief, feeling like one could "breathe again", a releasing of the anxiety and stress, and to repair damage.

Having support during this time was perhaps the most strongly emphasized factor in coping and recovery. Many of the participants began to speak with people about what had happened in the relationship more widely, sometimes for the first time, post-breakup. This led to many developing a community of understanding within which they found people either in their own circles or in other venues who had similar encounters with partners or family members with narcissistic traits. It was upon these connections that several participants concluded that the experience of this form of emotional abuse is a

unique one, and that it is very difficult for someone who had not been through it to fully grasp the subtleties and cumulative nature of INT behavior over time. A few of the participants used the term “club” to describe those people who can connect to a full understanding of a relationship and the outcomes of this form of narcissistic abuse, and one that no one wants to be a part of.

At differing moments post-relationship, participants entered new partnerships and a large number attributed some of their healing to being able to visibly identify the contrasting behaviors of a healthy and functional relationship and/or the feeling of being desired and valued through kind and empathetic treatment. The support given by many of these new partners has allowed many participants to shed the sense of having to self-sacrifice to one’s detriment for the sake of a relationship.

Sub-RQ1- How did former partners of individuals with narcissistic traits view themselves before, within, and after the relationship?

Many of the participants were feeling quite positive about their lives and themselves at the beginning of the relationship. Conversely, however, most identified a lack of confidence in romantic relationships, and in some extremes, an insecurity about deserving love, or feeling worthy of it. Almost all described themselves as emotionally vulnerable in some way as they entered their relationships for reasons ranging from youth and age gaps, to having previous abusive relationships. It became clear that a part of the vulnerability which was capitalized on by INTs was the participants’ self-undervaluation of their capabilities, especially when measured against their partners. Because of the

narcissistic tendencies of INTs, it is likely that PNTs were chosen as long-term partners due to their objective competence and perceived status in some way.

The agreeable nature of many of the participants lent itself to the INT gradually asserting dominance in dyad dynamics, and ultimately decision making. Boundary setting or implementing them was a challenge described by most participants. As well, several the participants saw themselves (and still do) as “helpers” or caretakers, which translated to identifying someone with large emotional needs (the INTs) for whom they could provide their valuable skills to in a relationship. Unfortunately for all involved, this quest to provide value would prove to be an insurmountable task, since narcissistic people require constant admiration and service, which, as these narratives demonstrate, is impossible to sustain over time.

During the relationship, participants described themselves most commonly as changing in nonpositive ways. Almost half depicted a feeling of shrinking or feeling smaller. In many of these circumstances, this was a survival technique for maintaining a low profile to avoid notice, conflict, or their partner’s anger. Because of the aforementioned increasing isolation created by the relationship conditions, participants often mentioned a sense of great loneliness. This occurred because participants were becoming aware that they did not have a partner who they could trust or count on to be there for them emotionally or physically. In some cases, INTs worked away from home or there was a long-distance component that at times that went unmitigated because of the lack of energy spent by the INT in modification or reassurance.

Because of the continued pressure to do better and to continually work for a moving goalpost of approval or care from partners, many of the participants identified encountering pressure around body image. In several dyads, this was overtly promoted by the INT. However, some participants felt a self-imposed pressure to change themselves as part of their ongoing list of adjustments needed to maintain the relationship. Some participants reported losing a great deal of weight due to the stress of this. The longer participants were in the relationship, the less they had a sense that their input mattered. A process of conditioning would happen through ongoing interactions in the dyad which lessened safety for participants to state their point of view or to challenge what was happening. Participants identified that they would often be told, (or it was implied) that they were wrong, at fault, they were reacting badly, nothing they did was good enough, or they would be subject to extreme reactivity, such as rage over an innocuous statement. The feelings of hurt, confusion, mistrust, and unpredictability meant that most began to slowly shut down over time and to back away from discussions or behaviors that might suggest an opinion (or worse, an alternate opinion), or challenge their partners in some way.

About half reported starting to lash out in anger and frustration in ways that they wouldn't have done in the past or with other partners. Even in those moments it seems that it was recognized by most that this behavior was out of character, but that there was difficulty in identifying or fixing the root cause. In essence, this behavior appeared to be a response to the emotional abuse they were experiencing, including the above-mentioned loss of a voice or of need fulfillment, the lack of recognition of personal value, and the

often-extreme imbalance of emotional and physical labour that they were doing in the household or for the relationship.

In the ending, the narratives gave a dichotomous sense of how the participants viewed themselves. Firstly, most participants experienced a loss of self-worth, confidence, and esteem, also increased self-doubt, financial insecurity, and confusion. The most commonly occurring description of that period indicated a lost sense of who they were as people, or “empty shell” compared to how they saw themselves previously.

Secondly and conversely, many of the participants also began to take action to gain strength and independence back before their break-ups occurred. This dichotomy suggests that participants were recognizing that they acutely needed to preserve a sense of self somehow and were beginning to conclude that this could not happen within the confines of the relationship. It appeared that sometimes the implementation of these personal changes may have spurred their INT partners to terminate the relationships in cases where PNTs did not end it themselves, possibly due to INT ego-threat.

After having some distance and time through separation from their partners, overall, participants were feeling their sense of self returning. Almost all, however, are still feeling the scars of their relationship, even years later. Primarily this appears to be exhibited in situation-specific moments where self-worth concepts might be a factor. For instance, some participants still find it difficult to ask for their needs and wants. A couple participants are still struggling to reclaim a feeling of stability and have not yet moved past the relationship in a way that demonstrates substantial healing.

Most participants have been actively working on personal growth in areas that might have made them vulnerable to their partners' abuse and feel that they have a healthier balance in terms of self-esteem, giving, and boundary setting in relationships. Many of the participants have realized and are respecting their limitations in caretaking partners and others and are willing to challenge moments that do not feel right for them. Many participants feel better able to admire their strengths, rather than hiding them or allowing someone to minimize them. Primary areas that formed the bulk of self-views post-relationship included active efforts to listen to and trust any instinctual feelings around relationships, particularly since this was suppressed habitually in the dyads. Participants now recognize their own resilience, having been through a traumatic set of experiences with someone who was supposed to love and care for them. Most are recognizing the strengths that they had exhibited all along, which they may not have previously given themselves credit for and are applying learning and new skills going forward. Sometimes participants credited their most difficult moments with a new larger sense of understanding of their own capabilities, such as having to face extreme conflict in court battling their ex. Most have found that their skills in identifying and maintaining healthier relationships early on has changed for the better.

Sub-RQ2- How do former partners who have been in long-term relationships with an individual who exhibits narcissistic traits make sense of the longevity of the relationship?

Participants explored the deterioration of their sense of personhood in their relationships as a major factor in the longevity. Several believed that they stayed in their dyads due to naivety and insecurity created by INT partners. They indicated that there

was a barrier to leaving because a sense of safety and self-esteem needed to be able to cut off their relationship had deteriorated. Partners became the pivot-point, and the longer PNTs stayed in the relationship reality became more warped, and the harder it was to definitively pinpoint the psychological abuse.

After initial vulnerabilities and experiencing emotional abuse over time, all narratives included information about changed mental states. Because the INTs so regularly demanded exclusive focus, participant horizons narrowed, becoming more limited, centralizing around maintaining harmony in the relationship. What this meant for participants, is that they no longer had the capacity to invest in their own lives or individuality as they might have before. Some of the outcomes included an inability to see forward for the self, denial, lack of objectivity, or inability to recognize the lack of functionality of relationship events, akin to putting “blinders” on. For some this meant a dissociation from, or a feeling of a lack of ownership over personal emotional states. This sense of numbness appeared to be linked to even less safety or space for participant self-expression or opinion in the relationship. A common feature was a sense of exhaustion in dealing with the regular and unpredictable emotional upheaval corresponding to INT volatile mood states and demands, paired with the inability to properly attend to self-care and wellbeing. One element of wellbeing that was commonly mentioned was a lack of room to “breathe” or to process feelings, mainly because typical and ongoing relationship refrains revolved around what the INT needed or wanted and what the PNT was doing wrong or needed to do better. The alternative became increased unhealthy conflict, making it exceedingly difficult for participants to make sense of events of the relationship

whilst enmeshed. Plummeting self-esteem due to the “never good enough” message was one way in which vulnerability to manipulations may have increased over time. This vulnerability may have been buoyed by increasing negative self-talk as feelings. Some of the participants were also afraid to experience a loss of companionship that could occur should they end things with their partner (likely due to the INT having become the extreme central focus to PNTs).

Family of origin (FOO) concepts entered narratives around longevity concerns, and in some cases, this was expressed directly by PNTs who felt “primed” for their dynamic based on certain conditions from childhood. For instance, specific behavioral normalizations had occurred, or one or both of their parents may have expressed narcissistic traits themselves. In several situations, participants had been taught that they must accept or perform specific roles which led to reinforcing agreeableness characteristics and caretaking roles to the detriment of the self. Some of these role expectations related to embedded cultural value systems. As well for some, early attachment traumas forged the drive to sacrifice oneself in favor of keeping the attachments, no matter how unhealthy.

Relationship beliefs were established as a longevity factor for almost all. These included the concept that one did not give up on romantic partnerships, in some cases, at all costs. This was particularly reinforced when participants felt specially chosen by their partners or that their partners were the “one”. An additional layer for some participants was spiritual beliefs, suggesting concepts such as that a marriage is forever, or there was a high stigma for divorce, thus presenting barriers for leaving.

Personality factors were also considered in conjunction with longevity. While caretaking may have been promoted by FOO, often participants described this behavior as a trait or a piece of personal identity. Normally this could be seen as a positive contribution to relationships, however, it can become nonfunctional in a PNT-INT dyad due to the INT propensity to take advantage of people with giving natures, as was seen in all the narratives. Boundaries for appropriate giving of the self were actively eroded by INTs, and paired with agreeable/flexible traits, gave rise to extreme overbalance of sacrifice to the detriment of the self. Something to consider in terms of why these relationships didn't implode sooner, as research suggests most narcissistic relationships quickly do, is that it is possible participants' agreeableness and caretaking natures allowed for more sustained feeding of the narcissistic supply over time. As a triadic feature, participant empathy allowed for consideration and concern for INT's perspective. This meant giving hefty weight to assertions that may have been manipulative or false in nature, thus giving space for INTs to unwarrantedly portray themselves as the victim.

Related to emotional abuse and above-mentioned factors, and the imbalanced and controlling nature of many of the INT partners, participants often attributed longevity to a sense of reliance on the relationship. The needs and wants of the INT became the needs of the whole, with the participants' role being to fulfill those. Many of the participants alluded to not knowing who they were outside of the relationship. This state of codependence was actively promoted by some INTs and indirectly reinforced using participants' insecurities and sensitive spots against them. Codependence generally requires leaning into a relationship in an exaggerated way, and certain conditions of the

PNT-INT bond served that purpose. For instance, related to the regular betrayal of PNT trust, came forms of behaviors that did not support participants, such as lying and indifference. Unfortunately, because PNTs believed their partners to be something different from what they ultimately discovered them to be, and often found themselves suppressing their own instincts to maintain the relationship, it became challenging to know who they could trust or rely on in a more general sense, leading to further reliance.

Due to the heightened investment into the dyad, an accompanying fear of losing the relationship or everything grew, thus becoming another barrier to leaving. Increased commitments that were made during the relationships represented a binding force between the dyads, and at times appeared to be used strategically as a “carrot” to keep the participants tied in. Binding emerged most often when the INT seemed to recognize that participants were distancing themselves in some way. Compelling factors were any elements that further integrated the dyad, such as material goods, children, and family structures, for example. These items or ideas were regularly introduced by the INT and were less likely to be driven in some way by participants, however, were either attractants and/or required participant investment. Because of this sense of being bound to relationships in multiple ways, participants reported feeling trapped. Finances and children were the most discussed reasons for this feeling, in the sense that participants either saw limited options for themselves or felt that commitments to family superseded personal happiness. At this point, participants were generally feeling maximally isolated from their supports, including a worry that people would not understand what was happening as well as a sense of shame for these events or continuing to allow it to

happen. The decreased ability to lean on others or to access logistical support created additional barriers in contemplating leaving.

Finally, an important consideration in the longevity of the dyads was INT personalities. The combination of persuasive entitlement and manipulation paired with emotional abuse and for many, a charming façade, kept participants from clearly identifying what they were feeling about INT behaviors until much later in the relationships. INTs were heavily invested in image management, so feedback from others around the dyad was often highly positive. Alternatively, those who could see under the surface most often chose to keep silent about what they saw until after the breakups. This created a gulf between what participants were gradually perceiving to be true versus what they thought their partners were initially based on what INTs promoted publicly. This dichotomy was exceedingly difficult for participants to parse apart, especially at the stage when things began to devolve. Since it was constantly being reinforced for participants that they were incorrect in any negative assessments of their partners, and their perceptions were being challenged in a multitude of other ways, recognizing INTs' true natures took some time. This is especially poignant since even the mental health professionals in their lives often took years to identify the issues as well. This is despite all INTs presenting with clusters of classical traits associated with narcissism (in four cases, leaning heavily towards the vulnerable subtype). It was also found that INT FOOs contributed to some dyad longevity. Mainly this took the form of normalizing INT behaviors, sometimes through modelling or enabling, and sometimes through framing the participants as the source of difficulties in the relationship.

Discrepant Cases

At times discrepancies appeared in the data and they were either folded into the related code as contrast with special mention or given their own code. Some examples of discrepancies are comprised of data that was included in the 'Charming Façade' code. For some, their partners did not fit the traditional classification of a narcissist from the DSM 5 (APA, 2013) in the sense that they were not overtly charming. In fact, Cecilia suggested that her partner was the opposite. What was revealed in cross-comparison of these reports is that INT partners who did not fit with the definition of this code did fit the Vulnerable Subtype (Dickinson and Pincus, 2003) based on the partner-report screening tool outcomes. This was also noticed in the 'INT Personality' code, where a few of the participants emphasized the extreme victimhood stance that their partners would exhibit, a step beyond refusing to accept responsibility or accountability. Similarly, there were very polarized opinions on the first meeting of the INT partner. Seven participants disliked the person initially, a few quite strongly. In one case, the marriage was arranged, and while that technically fell into the 'Rapid Progression' code due to the initial speed of the commitment, the circumstances of why rapidity occurred were unique.

Seven participants described at least one incident of physical abuse and one additional person of a threat (addressed in the 'Rage' code); however, it was not always perceived by participants as physical abuse at the outset of the interviews. One instance of physical abuse was perpetrated by a PNT. In terms of other extreme behaviors, two INT partners maintained a lie about having cancer over a length of time to manipulate their partners, and one INT had a "secret" child before meeting the PNT. This was

revealed to the PNT through other sources years after the beginning of the relationship.

Two lied about or threatened suicide attempts to get what they wanted from the PNT.

In another example of discrepant cases in the 'Cheated On' code, four of the participants were actually "the other woman" when beginning their relationships (only one of whom knew about their partner's other relationship initially). These were included because it speaks to their partner's pattern of cheating behavior, however, were slightly outside of the code definition.

For the 'End-Fallout' codes and 'Self View-Post', a couple participants reported that they felt that they were not on a path to recovery of themselves, which may be a product of not having enough distance or time from the relationship yet, or perhaps other life circumstances. One participant stands out because they didn't see the end of the relationship coming and still felt relatively "happy" in the relationship, so much of the trajectory of decline happened post-separation.

It emerged from initial conversations that one of the participants had multiple NPD partners, however, in collaboration, we decided to focus on the story from the most recent and long-term partner. The influence of these multiple relationships showed up particularly in the 'Emotionally Vulnerable' code as this participant had come out of an abusive relationship just before meeting the partner of note. She described herself as "barely hanging on".

Some discrepant data received its own code based on the impacts to the relationship such as the 'Addictions' code. This code indicated INT addictions which added another layer to five of the participant's struggles with their partner's behavior.

The 'Mental Health' and 'Sexual Issues' codes (referring to the INT) emerged under similar circumstances in seven and six of the stories respectively. 'Medication' ended up being a code from what was originally seen to be discrepant data, and four of the participants cited this as being helpful to their recovery efforts.

Summary

The guidepost to this research was the question, "What are the experiential narratives of former partners who have been in a long-term relationship with an individual who exhibits narcissistic traits, from meeting to post-termination?" The sub questions emphasized the participants self-views at four points during the relationships and after, as well as how participants made sense of the longevity of the relationships. Narratives were analyzed thematically, and five themes were uncovered explaining the relationship trajectories and the events of each era. These include the Foundations of establishing the relationship, the moments that the participants began to recognize what else was Below the Surface of their INT partner's personality and behavior, the Roller Coaster of the relationship in which there existed a cycle of devolution followed by rewooding and an extreme gulf between INT façades and behavior, the Recovery and Leaving phase which included factors leading to the separation, the separation itself, the coping strategies that proved to be important, and the Hindsight moments comprising of the participants' perceptions of the self at the time of interviews and their reflections on growth and learning to that point after some time and distance from the relationships.

All participants experienced forms of emotional abuse which seemed to have root in an INT push for power and control. What made these dynamics unique from other

forms of emotional abuse was the extreme level and variety of manipulations as regular features of the relationships, designed to promote PNT service to their partners. The loss of the sense of self and heightened levels of self-doubt was discernable universally because of the sense of ownership of fault and cognitive dissonance that existed as the partnership developed. The impact on wellness was grave, yet participants felt entrapped by the relationships and their partners until they began to develop independence in some way. Incredible moments of resilience and resistance were shown by all participants. Recovery has been a long process, and some are still actively healing.

These themes are discussed in more detail in the Chapter 5 interpretations linked to existing research and within the social exchange framework. Limitations to the study will be included, recommendations for further study, as well as the implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The focus of this study was to explore how PNTs described the engagement, duration, and termination of their relationships with INTs. This included changes in the PNTs' self-views as they defined the relationship trajectory, and any attributions made to illuminate the longevity of their connection. Very little research previously existed from the PNT perspective regarding the PNT-INT dynamic, yet arguably these are the people most affected by their partner's narcissistic behaviors. The information from this study could assist with the education of those in the helping fields, and particularly to address the unique characteristics of these dyads as a foundation for directed interventions.

The interview narratives illustrated relationships filled with extremes and cyclical patterns. Data analysis exposed five main themes describing eras in the relationships, including the Foundations, Below the Surface, Roller Coaster, Recovery and Leaving, and Hindsight. (See Appendix D for the breakdown of the themes into their hierarchical coding structure). The highs of the relationship encapsulated moments such as the heightened stages of wooing contrasted by increasingly more intensely negative behaviors and emotional abuse directed towards participants by their partners. INT partners were astute enough to find the levers that would keep their partners in the relationship, and/or to keep them returning after breakups, until the final termination. Participants often realized that they had invested a high level of their resources unusually quickly into the relationship, and often that included an emotional investment based on the façade that their partners had presented them, two key factors of the social exchange framework backdrop.

Participants either were feeling stronger by the termination point or the INT had found a new partner before the end. Negative behaviors often did not cease with the termination of the relationship, and in many cases, devolved further at that point. However, participants in this research, almost universally, could identify clusters of coping and recovery tools that were successful in moving towards their own greater personal wellness and more positive self-views.

Within this chapter, the findings have been interpreted with a view to the limitations involved. Recommendations are included for how this work may be extended, as well as the implications for social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

Very little research has previously been gathered regarding the experiences and impact on individuals partnered with an INT, especially in an in-depth fashion. This research illuminates that there are common threads to the PNT-INT dyadic experience and supports the assertion that partnering with an INT entails being exposed to a unique set of wooing behaviors, emotional abuse characteristics, and commonly-patterned relationship trajectories. The wellness outcomes for the participants in this research were relatively similar near the end of the relationships, although recovery patterns differed depending on personal circumstances, continued contact with the INT or not, length of time since the breakup, and PNT personalities.

The findings were analyzed through the lens of two social exchange theories, investment and affect, which are woven throughout the interpretations. The social exchange model (Homans, 1958) demonstrates that humans will weigh the benefits of a

relationship against the costs and either choose to continue if net positive or terminate if not. However, some couples stay together even when the costs begin to outweigh the benefits due to factors such as relationship satisfaction, comparison with alternatives, and level of investment (Rusbult, 1980). It appears from the current data, that the latter two factors play an important role in the duration of the PNT-INT dyads. Over the course of the relationship, PNT sense of self and self-worth is strategically eroded, and paired with INT requirements of exclusive focus on their own needs as a central point of the relationship, the concept of alternative partnerships and possibility for a romantic relationship apart from the INT seems remote or nonexistent to the PNT. Participants reported sensations akin to a sense of learned helplessness, first investigated by Overmier and Seligman (1967) wherein dogs who were exposed to inescapable shocks, originally, began to have deficits in coping even when there was an escapable aversive stimuli. The results of learned helplessness in people are some of the common symptoms of depression and can occur when one feels helpless to avoid negative environments.

In addition, because of the unique relationship trajectory between the PNT and the INT, the foundations of which are created under the illusion that the INT is a perfect or superior partner, the PNTs tended to invest heavily into the relationship fairly rapidly in most cases, and the INT partner actively promoted binding ties which served to prolong continued engagement even through negative INT behavior dynamics.

A further consideration which provides explanation for the distinctiveness of the PNT-INT dyad, is the affect social exchange theory in which Lawler (2001) demonstrated that social interactions and the subsequent state of emotional effect for each

of the individuals involved matters to the strength of the attachment experienced to the relationship. INTs seem to be extraordinarily skilled at wooing and promoting positive connections, especially in the beginning stages of the relationship, and this combined with personal histories and personality factors of the PNTs subsequently created highly enmeshed conditions for the PNTs. INTs often placed their partners on a pedestal that would crumble rapidly after the initial stages of the relationships. These observations support the work of Smith et al. (2018) and Ye et al. (2016) who show that when the PNT expresses needs or has flaws, idealization begins to disappear because the INT feels entitled to a perfect reflection. (See Chapter 2- Changes Over Time in the Relationship). Seidman's (2016) research, mentioned in Chapter 2, demonstrates that narcissists are primarily attracted to extrinsic (attractiveness, status etc...) qualities and are outwardly disdainful of intrinsic ones (empathy, kindness etc...) when they discover them in their partner. Also, Jones & Paulhus (2011a), Kernberg, (1975), and Konrath et al., (2014) speak about the turning point where the PNT no longer holds the same value once they are not just an object to facilitate INT wants. (Chapter 2- The Negative or the Dark Side)

The findings are presented thematically and address the participants' experiences of their relationships and recovery, their self-views at various points of the relationship, and how participants make sense of the longevity of their dyads.

The distinction between other manipulative or emotionally abusive relationships and that of the PNT-INT dyads rests in the specific cluster of heightened narcissistic traits of the INT partner. This also includes consideration of the positive behaviors that are typical within both the grandiose and vulnerable subtypes inherent with increased

narcissism. A PNT may experience life with an extremely charming person who showers them with intense love, attention, and compliments, and who is a highly adept social performer, or alternatively a person of deep and intellectual presence, with a knack for pontification while appearing knowledgeable or worldly. That is, until the PNT is committed enough that the INT can begin to test PNT boundaries of acceptance. It is at this point that masked narcissistic characteristics begin to emerge gradually, such as the lack of empathy, entitlement, exploitation, arrogance, and a fragile ego. The PNT experience and outcomes of these behaviors on participants is identified below.

Foundations of the Relationship

The first stage of the PNT-INT dyad includes the foundations of the relationship, during which the INT partner presented a carefully curated and partial image of the self to draw their partner into commitment. The bond was often strengthened through extreme wooing processes and persistence, and in part aided by PNT personality factors and vulnerabilities, such as a propensity towards agreeableness, for example. Agreeableness is a Big Five personality trait that encompasses pro-social behaviors such as kindness, altruism, patience, tolerance, generosity, empathy, avoidance of conflict, and trusting (Tackett et al., 2019). While agreeableness is in fact an important characteristic in maintaining relationship satisfaction (Dyrenforth et al., 2010), in terms of the PNT-INT dyad, it is a trait that can be taken advantage of in service to INT desires. Conversely, across the board, narcissists test lower than other people in agreeableness (Horan et al., 2015), which can manifest in selfishness and mistrust, and they would be more likely to

use insults and manipulation and/or to become combative quickly in interactions (Zajenkowski & Szymaniak, 2021).

Love Bombing primarily occurs in the initial phases of many narcissistic relationships and is characteristic of premature, highly concentrated compliments, attention, and gifts indicating interest and love (Perrotta, 2020). This is a strategy that will draw people in quickly and provide prospective partners with a carefully curated set of romantic gestures designed to present a highly attractive image to the specific person they are wooing (Back et al., 2013) and they may seem exceptionally responsive. According to Lawler's affect theory of social exchange (2001), when there is an accuracy and intensity to fulfilling the emotional states in a dyad by a partner, this can serve to create stronger attachment to that partner or to the foundation of the relationship, which is also what later can buoy the strength of the trauma bond. As was seen in PNT narratives, love bombing tends to decrease dramatically once the PNT has become enmeshed within the relationship, and more negative INT behaviors emerge (Perrotta, 2020).

Participants often reported that their INT partners initially worked at appearing like just the partner they needed or dreamed of, with a view to garnering benefits over the longer-term from the relationship. Konrath et al. (2014) suggest that INTs may possess an enhanced ability to read certain emotional states, which paired with exploitative natures allows for greater skill at manipulation. As Lawler (2001, p. 322) states, these types of successful interactions could create an emotional "high" for the PNTs and encourage stronger bonds to their INT partner. INTs have a tendency to be very adept at forming

relationships quickly because of highly socially favorable first impressions and initial behaviors (Back et al., 2013).

In hindsight, this dynamic appeared to be that of predator and prey, with manipulation, molding, and strategy used as a currency on behalf of INT desires. The stage was being set for the relationship and the PNT to fulfill the role of worker, caretaker, and cheerleader of the dyad and the INT in a logistical, physical, and emotional sense, requiring effort and change from the participants on an ongoing basis, with little to none of that from the INTs. This relates to the game playing strategies (“ludus”) favored by narcissists in relationships which allows them to receive what they want from partners without having to engage in true emotional intimacy (Lamkin et al., 2015).

Figures 8a and 9 explain the cluster of risk factors for engaging in a PNT-INT dynamic paired with factors increasing the chances of the longevity. These are in no specific order, and participants may not have experienced all factors.

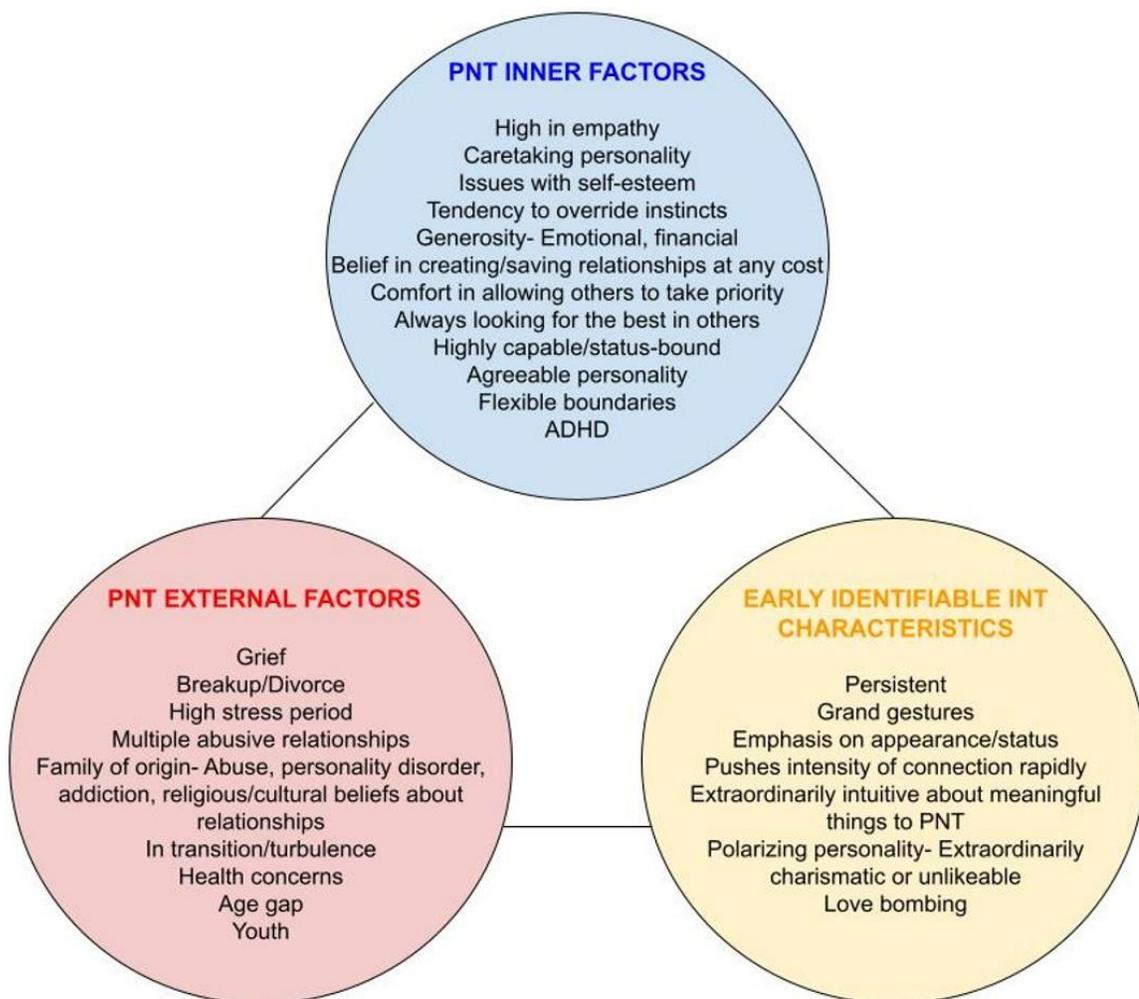
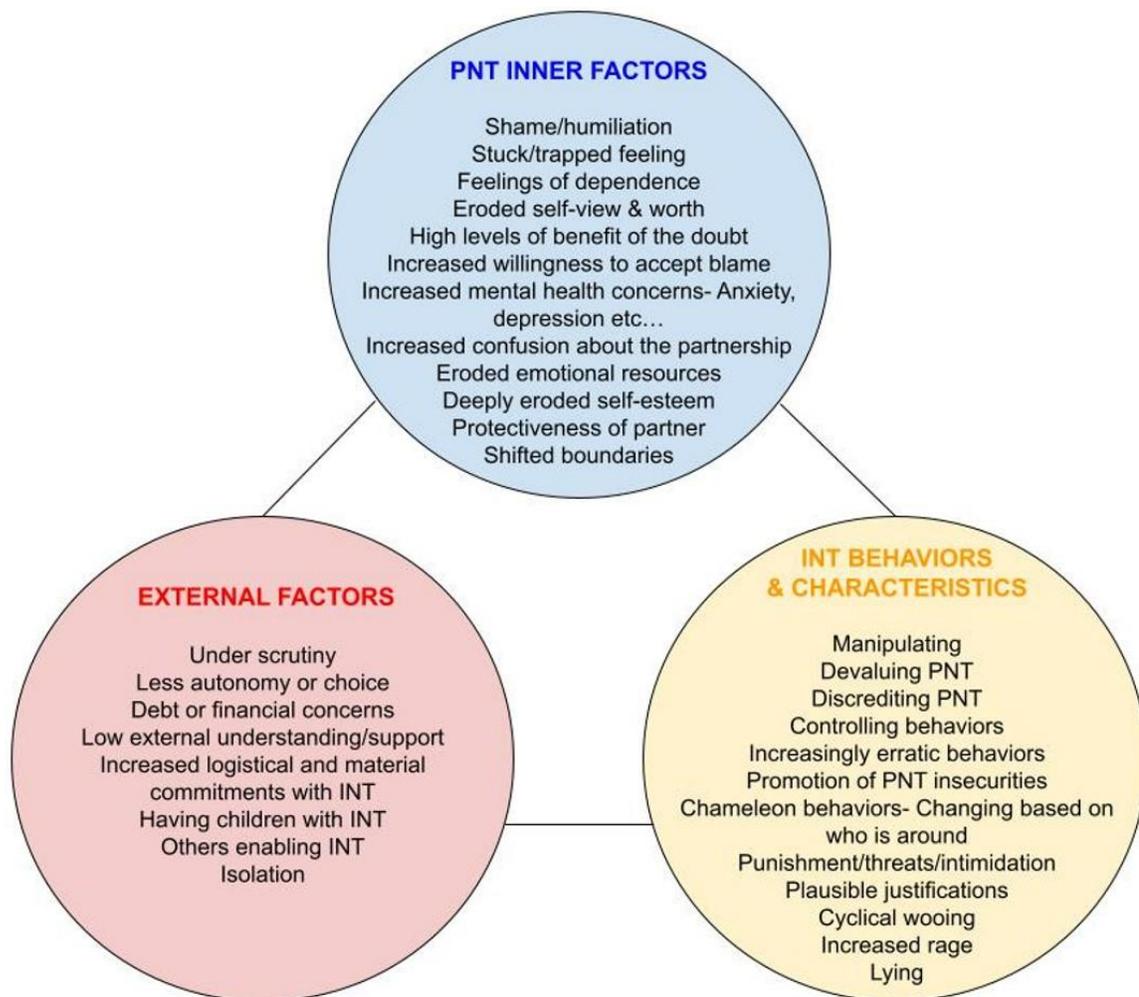
Figure 8*Early Risk Factors for Entering a PNT-INT Dyad*

Figure 9

Additional Maintenance Factors that Served to Increase Longevity of Relationships



Note: The above factors are also clustered with the early risk factors of 8.

Below the Surface

Back (2013), Campbell and Campbell (2009) and Wurst (2017) have established that as a narcissistic relationship evolves, PNTs will become increasingly privy to the negative sides of their partners personalities. Brummelman et al. (2018) remark that, “narcissists’ charming first impressions crumble with the passage of time” (p. 50). The

INT may 'talk a good game' but do not generally back the words up by actions. There may be large dichotomies or swings between wooing behaviors versus manipulative, aggressive behaviors, or indifference and withdrawal, and shows of charisma or likeability, alternating with highly nonprosocial behaviors, for example. Zuo et al. (2016) uncovered that narcissists can very successfully use prosocial behaviors (such as altruism) because they understand moral performance expectations, however this is conditional based on external recognitions of their moral identity and their current level of self-esteem. In other words, this behavior is an illusion designed to promote specific images for others and related to mood state.

Because INTs feel that they are perfect and successful in so many ways, they expect perfect reflections in their partners as well, especially in more visible realms promoting the INT images (Smith et al., 2018). (See Chapter 2- Changes Over Time in the Relationship for more information). This relates to the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder found in the DSM-5, that the person believes that they are "special and unique and can only be understood by or should associate with other special or high-status people." (APA, 2013, p. 669) This also explains, why some INTs would talk up their partners in front of others, while treating them as lesser at home, and why the INTs persisted, strategized, and in some cases wore down the PNTs over time so that PNTs would date them.

Even in this second stage, when PNTs began to glimpse less-desirable behaviors that bothered them about their partners, they expressed that they were able to put their early identification of red flags and troublesome events aside for quite some time in favor

of either INT or self-generated justifications. This was due primarily to their partners' skills in general manipulation, double-speak, and blame-twisting or gaining victimhood, as well as because of PNT agreeableness, empathy, and relationship beliefs. What would normally be pro-social and pro-relationship behaviors of the participants were successfully beginning to be taken advantage of and manipulated at this stage. While participants' instincts were most often present in those moments, those voices were drowned out by their INT partners' oppressive stance, which might include anything from confident or aggressive assertions to skewing the narrative to appear the victim of the PNT or circumstances. Cycles of the carrot and the stick (with periods of interim calm) emerge with love bombing, binding, and incentives to stay, followed by devolutions into abuse, anger, punishment, and withdrawal, similar to the cycle originally described by Walker (1979) to capture the nature of physical intimate partner violence. This devolution phase encapsulates the essence of a trauma bond in which a survivor is bound emotionally to the abuser due to an environment of intensity, complexity, inconsistency, and of a promise for something that fulfills a need of the PNT (Casassa et al., 2021).

It was often in hindsight that participants fully realized that their INT partners presented highly curated social behaviors depending on who they were in front of, and it was in this stage that PNTs became more exposed to increasingly negative conduct. Wurst et al. (2017) found that INTs show much less empathy in long-term relationships, demonstrating that the performance of empathy is likely a tool used in mate acquisition,

but may not feel as useful to the INT at later stages. Increased exposure to the INT reveals the darker side (Brummelman et al., 2018).

Participants reported that they felt that their instinctual voices became smaller over time and that their perceptions began to seem less worthy of consideration or credibility within the dyad. It was apparent that this was connected to the erosion of self-esteem and of a sense of self, the requirement to maintain focus on the INT needs at all times necessary to maintain emotional equilibrium in the relationship, as well as habitual dynamics in the dyad once behavioral precedence were established.

Roller Coaster

The third stage of the relationships was described as something akin to a roller coaster in which there was extreme highs and lows, that at the time, were seemingly unpredictable. Back et al. (2013) explain that because INTs are highly motivated by two pathways, that of admiration and rivalry, there is a fine balance between seeking favorable self-views and revenge-style behaviors (such as selfishness and hostility), resulting in conflicting behaviors and the sense of unpredictability. (See Chapter 2-Critical and Hostile Behavior). As well, the game-playing love style tends to create emotional upheaval because of the interchanging from attraction to aloofness and other negative mood states for reasons the PNT may not understand or be privy to, especially as they may have thought they were paired with a wonderful person to begin with (Lamkin et al., 2016; Ye et al., 2016).

This stage appears to be connected to the INT's sense that the PNT was fully committed to them and the relationship, because of emotional and logistical ties. As well,

the INT had been gradually testing participant boundaries, had a better sense of how far they could push, and which tools of manipulation were most successful by this point. What some participants began to gain insight into at this stage or beyond was that their INT partners were engaging in cost-benefit analysis to work as little as possible at the relationships, while still keeping their partner engaged in providing to their needs, fitting with the affect theory of social exchange principle discussed by Lawler (2018).

The participants were generally working at the lion's share of caretaking the relationship, their partners' emotional states, and when applicable, the household needs by this stage, to the detriment of their own personal needs. The principle of fair exchange was investigated by O'Boyle et al. (2012) who asserted that a lack of INT participation in relationships is a violation of the social contract. They simply do not feel the same sense of invested emotional responsibilities in a relationship that others might. Because of a belief in their own superiority and a sense of entitlement, partners are accommodated much less, and the usual binding influences of the social exchange are not present (Campbell, 1999). As Määttä et al. (2012) discovered, because INTs are so focused on their own needs and require their partners to do likewise, there is an insensitivity to PNT concerns. In fact, there is often the assumption that PNTs will service the INTs needs without a thought to their own and will often demand attention, even in group settings (Määttä et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2014; Wurst et al., 2017). This also included stepping into the role of fulfilling their partner's ego needs with admiration, attention, praise, and in some cases, submission. Määttä et al. affirm that PNTs would be subjected to some form of emotional punishment if they declined to behave in a way that

validated the INT. Sedikides et al. (2002) suggest that this occurs due to the INT's sense of superiority and their belief that others should care as much about their wellbeing as they themselves do. They are willing to exploit others' services to get the admiration they desire (Ye et al., 2016). (See Chapter 2- The Negative or Dark Side- Superiority). In fact, part of the shift from loving and affectionate to critical and hostile can be explained by PNTs becoming less willing to provide high volumes of admiration on a regular basis over time (Di Pierro et al., 2017).

It is at this point as well that participants became more vulnerable to increasingly regular and overt emotional abuse (EA). Carton and Egan (2017), Gewirtz-Meydan and Finzi-Dottan (2018), and Gormley and Lopez (2010) assert that emotional abuse is prevalent in narcissistic relationships due to INT personality characteristics. Because of the cycle of wooing and abuse, akin to an intermittent reward system, the participants would find themselves pulled back into the relationships as they began to distance themselves either consciously or subconsciously. Because of the dramatic cycle of highs and lows between attraction and aloofness that are characteristic to INT relationships (Lamkin et al., 2016), and PNT attempts at resistance, there is a sense of back and forth which in some cases could result in multiple breakups or unfulfilled plans to leave throughout the course of the relationship. Partners became more exposed to the INTs' antagonistic pathways, with critical and hostile behavior seeming more unpredictable over time (Back et al., 2013; Wurst et al., 2017). (See Chapter 2- Critical and Hostile Behavior). The intermittent reward system, in which positive and negative reinforcement is hard to predict, but when the reward is given can produce a euphoric or addictive

feeling and produce more persistence (in this case staying longer and trying harder in the relationship). Conditioning that takes place under an intermittent reinforcement schedule is considered the most powerful way to keep a person persisting in working for the perceived reward (Iversen, 1992). Csifcsák et al. (2020) also demonstrated that this system of conditioning can create a sense of learned helplessness and impaired coping ability in adults, which could make decisions around personal needs and the future of the relationship feel out of reach for PNTs.

Campbell (1999) was among early researchers who associated narcissistic traits with a game playing love style (Ludus) characterized using manipulation strategies to gain power and control in the relationship. This allows INTs to gain what they want from the relationship without having to do things that they don't want to, such as engage in emotional intimacy for their partner. Tortoriello et al. (2017) provide an example in that narcissistic individuals will strategically seek to induce jealousy in their partners to test the relationship and their ability to control, and to compensate for fragile self-esteem. Hepper et al. (2014) links the exploitative and entitled nature of INTs to gaslighting behavior in a bid to exert control. As Fatfouta et al. (2017) and Keller et al. (2014) point out, INTs will use their relationships to self-enhance regardless of the cost to their partner. Nevertheless, no research was found regarding intimate relationships with narcissists and a link to financial entitlement or abuse, so this code was somewhat unexpected and surprisingly large. However, financial abuse is an established component of emotional abuse (Kutin et al., 2017), which certainly fits for a narcissistic relationship, especially considering the entitlement and exploitative diagnostic criteria. As well, it

helps the INT to continue to maintain their self-view as superior to others and eliminate disagreements by dismissing their partner's perceptions (Abramson, 2014; Gass and Nichols, 1988).

Participants began to tip-toe around their partner's volatile mood states in attempts to create harmony in the relationship yet found they could not predict the direction that the next criticism would come from. This unpredictability often resulted in participants having ongoing and worsening anxiety symptoms, distress, and a great deal of confusion, particularly for those who might have thought themselves to be paired with someone who had seemed wonderful at first blush (Ye et al., 2016). Foster and Brunell (2018) attribute some of the heightened anxiety in INTs relationships to the game playing love style, which keeps their partner guessing at their level of interest, thus creating a stress inducing situation. Because INTs will often behave by emotionally abusing in seemingly unpredictable ways, including self-centered acts and hostility, PNTs might begin to react with heightened mood disruptions themselves, such as new anxiety states (Estefan et al., 2016).

Not only was it difficult to understand and make sense of their INTs partners' new set of behaviors, but the INTs were regularly changing the goal posts of their expectations without communicating these to PNTs or obtaining agreement. Participants were consistently told that they were the problem and given the message that they needed to do better or try harder. The sense of what was "normal" expectations for a partner was generally warped by this stage.

Unsurprisingly, control presented a very large factor in the relationships and the exploitative nature of the INT partners exhibited itself in a myriad of ways, enough to generate 24 subcodes. Multiple studies link a desire for power and control to the INT personality (Campbell et al., 2002; Määttä et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2017; Tortoriello et al., 2017). PNTs found that as the relationship began to revolve around INT desires, they began to lose the freedom to set the tone of the relationship environment, and this often took place in very subtle ways, such as the use of withdrawal to express INT disapproval and other conditioning methods. Commonly, PNTs found themselves manipulated into less control of financial decisions or losing money to their partners whims. INT control was greatly facilitated by PNTs being regularly devalued and discredited, meaning that participants felt less worthiness/never good enough, more to blame, or felt they had less credibility to change the balance of control, thus limiting a sense of choice. Coercive control and the need for dominance over participants fits many patterns of the INT behaviors including manipulation, intimidation, humiliation, and punishment (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018; Crossman et al., 2016; Dichter et al., 2018; Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2019). (See Chapter 2- Coercive Control and Restrictive Engulfment). Keller et al. (2014) have shown that INTs are more likely to engage in sexual coercion, for example, which was featured in many of the narratives.

With any participant push-back came gaslighting, name calling, and outsized rage, seemingly designed to eliminate the possibility that the participants had space to question or assert their needs. It was noticeable that overt gestures of hostility became more frequent and intense as time went on in the relationship, particularly if PNTs began

to recognize their partner's more subtle manipulations. Many of the participants began to fear their partners even in the absence of physical violence. It could be argued that participants were attuned at this point to their partner's lack of empathy and exploitative characteristics, meaning that the possibility existed of greater harm in the emotional and possibly physical realms.

In many ways, this abuse happened in what could be described as a partial vacuum. Often participants reported that support people had drifted away, distancing themselves because they were uncomfortable with the dynamics of the relationship or the INTs' behavior, because participants spent the bulk of their time maintaining the relationship or the needs of their partner, or participants self-isolated out of shame or a sense of protection of their partner. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, most participants were prevented from getting the kind of support that they needed because of the difficulty in describing the toxicity of small, discreet events that accumulated to a full picture of the abusive PNT-INT dynamic. There was an early realization that not many people would truly understand, had they not experienced a similar relationship. As well, INT partners often took control of the narrative with others and some participants felt that they were deliberately painted as the "bad partner" so that INTs could get away with much more without outside challenge. Research shows that INTs' low levels of agreeableness and higher levels of aggression combine with a belief that others are subservient to them, leading to derogation of their partners (Fatfouta et al., 2017; Longua Peterson & DeHart, 2014, Ye et al., 2016). To feel superior, someone else must be lesser than, a zero-sum principle where only one person can be the best (Brummelman et al.,

2018). Additionally, the INT will blame others for their mistakes or take credit for successes, even when accomplished by someone else (Hepper et al., 2014; Wurst, 2017). Making someone “lesser” than themselves is a way in which the INT is able to feel superior and to inflate their ego by shifting the power balance (Longua Peterson & DeHart, 2014). As well, because INTs will refuse to take personal responsibility, the blame for any issues in the relationship must therefore rest on their partner’s shoulders (Keller et al., 2014; Thomaes et al., 2013).

The EA and control elements were magnified in the relationships by the INTs’ facility to manipulate the truth with lies and justifications, via always having explanations for behavior, often twisting the narrative to involve PNTs in some version of “fault” for the outcomes. Research by Määttä et al. (2012) and Ye et al., (2016) supports that INTs will consider their partners to be noncredible when giving negative feedback and will also blame their partners for INTs’ own flaws. This altered version of reality presented cognitive distortions for the participants to wrestle with and was buoyed by others who enabled INT version of events.

EA was also paired with positive incentives that kept the participants wanting to maintain the relationship and to keep ties with their partners. At the heart of this was the knowledge of the good times in the relationship, and how their partners could treat them, which was often far beyond what one might generally expect from a romantic relationship. This helped to allow participants to rationalize away their partners’ explanations and denials of more negative behaviors, and in most cases, it was apparent that it was much easier to do so than to engage in another massively detrimental conflict.

Participants acknowledged that their INT partners were often uniquely skilled in painting images of what could be their future together, giving just enough to keep them around, but generally not ultimately following through. As well, when participants were beginning to pull away or to gain a sense of independence, their partners seemed to sense that and double down on wooing behaviors. Konrath et al. (2014) demonstrated that once a PNT is fully invested, INTs no longer feel the need to keep up their effortful pretenses until the relationship hits a crisis moment, at which point they take careful steps to pull their partner back in. Because participants were already questioning their own perceptions, this incentivizing led to giving INTs more benefit of the doubt than they may have otherwise.

Participants' self-view over the course of the relationship universally deteriorated. This deterioration happened quickly once EA was established as a common feature in the relationship, paired with the intense INT-centrism. Participants reported that they had begun to shrink compared to their prerelationship presence, especially within the relationship. Body image issues increasingly began to crop up for many of the participants because of feeling "not good enough" or being told overtly that they needed to improve something by their INT partners. Narcissists' focus on appearance maintenance primarily because outward validation of status and confidence are used to replace expressions of genuine self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2019), and these participant narratives demonstrate that this extends to the romantic partner also. In addition, research provides another partial explanation for some of this behavior in that the INT's low level of agreeableness can result in increased criticism and hostility in

relationships due to INT hypersensitivity (Ye et al., 2016). It is possible that the scrutinizing behaviors of the INTs could be a result of one of the two previously mentioned distinct pathways of motivation for INTs, that of rivalry (Back et al., 2013). By dissecting PNT behavior, the INT may be seeking to prove themselves superior in knowledge or capability.

Participants' acts of shrinking or keeping a lower profile was often related to appeasing their partners and avoiding INT blowouts or withdrawal. This included feeling like they no longer had a voice in the relationship. Patterned behavior was observable in the narratives regarding acceding to INT wishes, and participants related this mainly to feeling exhausted by partner demands (both overt and covert) and realizing that any difference of opinion would most certainly create massive conflict or punishing withdrawal. As well, blame for the conflict would be placed on participants with forceful and convincing arguments. Participants not only gradually became increasingly isolated from their supports, but also discussed being lonely within their relationships. Many of the INT partners either travelled for work or would absent themselves physically and emotionally from their partners at this stage. Reed and Enright (2006) and Jordan et al. (2010) discuss that threats of abandonment and "passive-aggressive withholding of emotional support" (p. 610) are some of the eight types of behaviors under the umbrella of emotional abuse. Määttä et al. (2012) demonstrated that if a PNT partner does not adequately fill the narcissistic supply through acts of service and admiration, the PNT would be subject to emotional punishment. INTs may view their partners as accessories to themselves, rather than independent or fully faceted individuals with needs of their

own and can, therefore, be easily provoked when their expectations are defied (Määttä et al., 2012). In addition, Keller et al. (2014) suggest that INTs in certain states of mind do not even need provocation to aggress but will direct anger towards whomever happens to be in proximity. Hepper et al. (2014) demonstrated that INTs are hypersensitive to critique, and as this data shows, participants were always risking a hostile reaction when they attempted to promote positive change. Overall, INTs will react with little sense of forgiveness for their partners (Strelan, 2007). Because of this, emotional safety is eroded for the PNT. These hostile behaviors, especially when challenged, have been explained in research to be related to the INTs low levels of agreeableness, high levels of exploitativeness, and to moments when they feel that appropriate amounts of admiration have not been forthcoming (Brummelman et al., 2018).

Many of the participants came to the realization at this stage of the relationship that they were likewise exhibiting increased frustration and anger themselves. In hindsight, participants were able to connect this change in behavior to an ongoing lack of needs being met, being required to do the majority of the emotional and logistical labour of the dyad, not being heard nor valued, and a fear of unpredictable reprisal for expressing a difference of opinion or perspective. Both Keller et al. (2016) and Lamkin et al. (2016) confirmed that PNTs are inclined to react to their partners with elevated hostility, which stands to reason when someone is regularly required to interact with a person who tends to be hostile and self-centered themselves.

Comorbidities such as INT addictions, mental health issues, and sexual issues added to the strife and unpredictable nature of many of the relationships. There was a

great deal of overlap in terms of symptomatic behaviors related to these issues and to diagnosable narcissism criteria. This could be explained through research which has shown that INTs have a high level of sensation-seeking drives that can exhibit as risk-taking, impulsivity, and low self-control (Horan et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2011b, Ye et al., 2016), possibly leading to, or combined with the above concerns.

Many of the stories illustrated unachievable ideals that INTs subscribed to, including for sexual activities. Some narratives implied the endorsement of a belief system akin to the “Madonna-Whore Complex” in which women fall into only one mutually exclusive category, based on their goodness and purity or alternatively degradation as a sex object (Bareket et al. (2018). These authors suggest that this dichotomy is an aspect of relationship control that, “reduces women’s sexual agency and puts women’s mental, physical, and sexual health at risk” (p. 520).

Couples therapy was attempted by most dyads and was commonly unsuccessful in the sense that INT partners were unwilling to change their own behaviors. INTs were often able to present as the “perfect patient”, would drop therapy quickly, or change therapists upon receiving suggestions that they themselves might have something to work on. In many of the cases, it took years for therapists to outwardly recognize narcissistic behaviors. However, it could be considered successful for some of the participants in the sense that several continued to get support individually and were assisted in identifying and labelling the roots of their partner’s behaviors.

Participants continued in the relationships because of a broad mix of reasons that were surprisingly common across narratives. In a sense, the PNT-INT dyads operated

around a short and narrow focus for the participants within the confines of the relationship. Participants were often so busy caretaking to the rapidly changing moods and whims of their partners, that other pieces of life and the ability to mentally process or move forward was vastly inhibited. Participants conveyed an inability to take time to reflect on the relationship as a whole or to make plans involving much beyond immediate concerns. Some participants coped by pulling away from feeling any emotional states, preferring the safety of remaining numb, and residual energy was spent on surviving the events of the relationship. Määttä et al. (2012) confirmed in their study that PNTs' predominant feeling after experiencing their partner's exploitative behavior was a sense of depletion. Because of lowered sense of self-esteem and negative self-talk that began to reflect their partners' voices, outside alternatives felt much more limited to many. As well, because of the erosion on self and INT partners placing themselves as central in the relationships, this negative self-talk became internal subconscious narratives for participants as well, leading to concerns that they would feel too lonely or undesired without their partners. Added to that, the perception was for many of the participants that that they had already invested so much into the relationship (partially due to the rapidity of the progression). As the investment theory of social exchange delineates, commitment to relationships partially relates to an awareness of available alternatives and the magnitude of investment into the current one (Rusbult, 1980).

Some of the participants felt primed by their families of origin (FOO) for being taken advantage of in relationships. A few FOOs were abusive in similar, manipulative ways, but other participants were subtly taught that the positive characteristic of

agreeableness was highly prized. This paired with less emphasis about boundary setting or of prioritizing the self-created conditions that made some PNTs vulnerable to their INT partners. In certain of the situations, participants referred to insecure attachments from their childhood, which contributed to continuing to work at the relationship, in hindsight, past the point of viability. Others mentioned that there was a cultural pressure around marriage or partnership which might have encouraged longevity, for instance that marriage is “forever” or that one should stay with a high-status partner.

Beliefs about relationships, including those that may have been embedded or contributed to by societal or community norms, as well as by participant FOO were observed as a factor that kept participants attempting to make the relationships work in the face of grave difficulties. It was noted that these types of beliefs leaned towards the idealistic, in the sense that one is obligated to fight for the relationship, even at the cost to the self. Spiritually speaking, some participants also felt compelled to remain in their marriages or believed that within their community they were not given the language to identify that what was happening was a form of abuse or worthy of self-protection. In addition, INT partners were generally skilled at self-promotion and some participants discussed that they felt special or chosen by their partners, a sensation which was difficult to put aside to examine the increasing flaws of the dynamic.

As has been alluded to previously, participant personality factored into the length of most of the relationships, and perhaps in all. This type of dyad examined in this research seems uniquely placed for a certain symbiotic interplay to occur. Participants’, on the whole, shared self-reported characteristics that are relationship-positive, such as

agreeableness, empathy, and caretaking capacity. In combination with the narcissistic traits of their partners who exhibited entitlement, low empathy, need for admiration, and were exploitative (APA, 2013), a repetitive cycle of unbalanced giving versus taking was created. It appears likely that the two personalities together allowed for the INT partner to establish a pattern of overuse of the PNTs' willingness to give and to make allowances for their partners over a longer-term. The agreeableness and empathy factors are contrary to some of the existing research which suggests theories around homophily in such dyads (for example in, Lamkin et al., 2015), however, previous studies tended to examine a younger population with more transient relationships. It must also be noted that years of research definitively demonstrates that narcissist in both subtypes (grandiose and vulnerable) are uniquely skilled at manipulation due to their elevated levels of emotional and social intelligence (Casale et al., 2019; Delič et al., 2011). In other words, they know how they "should" be acting socially or in their dyad, however, they will choose not to when it does not serve their own interests, likely because of their low levels of empathy.

Several participants spoke about their INT partners' uncanny abilities to "see" them and to determine what was important to them. Unfortunately, this ability allowed INTs to manipulate participants in a much more profound way. The above-mentioned research of Casale et al. and Delič et al. supports that INTs would be extraordinarily skilled in terms of the "perceptiveness of others' internal states and moods", "knowledge of social rules", "insight and sensitivity in complex social situations" (Delič et al., p. 479) and they have no compunction about serving their own ends to the detriment of others. A common tactic was to use participant insecurities or sensitivities against them, which also

eroded self-esteem further. A dynamic was created in many of the relationships wherein an emotional or logistic/material dependence was established for participants on their relationships or partner. Many of the participants reported a fear of losing everything because they had already invested so much (usually very quickly) from many realms into the relationship, a major criterion suggested by Rusbult (1980) that increases commitment (and thus longevity) in a relationship. Participants also felt bound by a sense learned helplessness in which having little power in the relationship meant strong reprisal for any PNT push-back. There was a realization for many that the relationship and their INT partner was not what was represented, and fear of their partners' tempers, potential financial hardship or losses, and increased isolation promoted a sense of being trapped or stuck in place. Reasons for isolation included the singular focus on the INT partner, moving a lot at the behest of a partner, jealousy about PNT social relationships, age gaps creating social distance in friend groups, hiding the negative nature of the relationship, and INT behavior relating to or towards PNT support people, the latter being something which Määttä et al. (2012) identified as problematic restriction in narcissistic relationships. These were compounded by an awareness that not only would outside people not understand enough to give appropriate support, but also by deep feelings of shame or humiliation about the true state of things. For instance, although EA was perpetrated by the INT partners, participants expressed feeling shame that they "allowed" their partners to do this to them, didn't act on ending the relationships sooner, or that the relationship was not how they had described to people at first. Crossman et al. (2016) demonstrated that participants in their study about emotional abuse did not disclose the

truth about their relationships out of fear or embarrassment. This ownership of displaced emotional “fault” was an ongoing theme in most of the narratives and something that many participants described themselves as having worked on or are currently working on changing for themselves.

As previously mentioned, INT personality traits contributed a great deal to the longer-term maintenance of these relationships because of the ability to draw partners into commitment quickly, followed by strategic behaviors designed to ensure compliance of their partners. For instance, INTs are highly proficient in “impression management” (O’Boyle et al., 2012, p. 560), but lacked skills in sustaining long-term relationships. INTs often have extraordinary levels of charm and charisma which develops into social popularity, and initially only, comparatively higher levels of romantic satisfaction (Carlson & DesJardins, 2015; Hepper et al., 2014; Ye et al., 2016). The INTs’ ability to lie or to manipulate the truth to their own ends was often so unanticipated and such foreign thinking to participant, that it generally took quite some time for PNTs to catch on. This behavior was often enabled by the family or friends who the INT chose to keep close to themselves, which further challenged participants’ perceptions of events. Typically, narcissists will surround themselves more closely with people who are willing to enable their goals and disregard or distance themselves from those who don’t (Clifton, 2018; Nevicka, 2018) meaning that feedback to participants often echoed INT agendas.

Resistance behaviors occurred throughout every stage but were primarily referenced in conjunction with this stage. Participants pushed back in mainly subtle ways, using humor or gentle suggestions, but were often met with exaggerated hostility,

withdrawal, or displaced victimhood by their partners. In most of the relationships, larger moments of resistance prompted a renewal of the wooing cycle seemingly designed to prevent increased participant independence and to draw them back into the relationship.

Recovery and Leaving

Towards the end of the relationships, the self-view deterioration continued to the point that participants were questioning their own self-worth, and most suggested that their self-esteem and confidence were at the lowest points. They did not feel entitled to their own feelings. Participants spoke about feeling “foggy” and confused about what was happening in the relationship. Trust in the self was and others was generally at the lowest point and some of the terms used by participants as descriptors included: “empty shell of myself”, “lost myself”, “self-doubt”, and “drained”. It was clear that the PNT-INT dyads depleted the PNTs to some of the lowest points that they have ever experienced. Gass and Nichols (1988) determined that after a relationship such as these, PNT’s could be left questioning their own instincts and perceptions of the world, including experiencing frustration, confusion, and becoming mistrustful.

Conversely, most of the participants were also seeking pathways out of the relationship by this stage and many were actively taking steps towards increasing independence and to promote their own healing. It appears that these participant actions were the catalyst for the end of the relationships. For those participants who left the relationship, the recovery process usually started well before the end of the relationships, prompting access to alternative thinking, self-care, and different forms of new support. When the INT left, participants generally attributed this leaving to PNTs gaining a similar

sense of independence or due to increased PNT pushback. In some cases, however, participants noted that they felt their INT partner had taken what they wanted and subsequently gotten bored with them or the confines of the relationship, universally moving on to their next partner (usually before the end of the relationship). INTs do have a much higher predisposition to cheat on romantic partners (Wurst et al, 2017; Ye et al., 2016) because they have less feelings of investment and commitment, which is positively correlated to the quality of alternatives, as well as having more comfort with casual sex and less desire for sexual intimacy (Mikkelsen & Pauley, 2013; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012). (See Ch. 2- Investment Theory of Social Exchange). INTs often have more ease in starting new relationships because of their agentic qualities and investment in appearance (Wurst et al., 2017) and have lower levels of associated guilt over cheating (Jones & Paulhus, 2011a, 2011b). For some INTs, cheating may be a behavior partially designed to elicit jealousy from their partners (Tortoriello et al., 2017).

The end of the relationships for all participants who chose to leave was characterized by a vindictive backlash from the INT and higher-than-usual conflict. Often this was the case even when it was the INT who did the leaving as well.

The narcissists always seem so angry and bitter when you find your power. It's like somehow you betrayed them. As crazy as it sounds, they put a lot of work into getting you to be submissive and under control. So how dare you betray them. (Consiglio, 2022)

A few participants identified that the conflicts created appeared to be strategic bids by the INT to obtain something that they wanted, in some cases, for the PNT to return to the

relationship. In other examples, participants who were married to their partners regularly found themselves in substantially conflictual, ongoing, and numerous court battles to keep their partners from removing access to their children, finances, and assets. Keller et al. (2014) reported that INTs acknowledged that they are vindictive or intrusive to their partners, and that this happens particularly in longer-term dyads (Wurst et al., 2017). Back et al. (2013) explained that the motivational pathways of a narcissist (admiration and rivalry, NARC) prompt revenge-seeking and conflictual behaviors (see Chapter 2).

Multiple INTs also surveilled, stalked, and harassed their former PNT partners post-breakup to the point that a few participants were afraid for their lives. This is a form of coercive control which participants also experienced within their relationships. Crossman and Hardesty (2018) and Dichter et al. (2018) corroborate that coercive control does not simply end once the relationship does.

Day et al. (2019) determined that heightened distress in an INT relationship often results in remembered trauma even after the relationship is terminated. Roughly half of participants reported experiencing some form of trauma response post-separation, ranging from panic attacks around reminding-triggers or the actual presence of their former partners, to extreme measures of avoidance of their partner or places, events, and people of remembrance. The trauma reactions occurred in response to events throughout whole of the relationship, however, notably transpired for all (however wasn't limited to) the participants who reported vindictive behaviors and/or surveillance from their partners. Indeed, Crossman et al. (2016) showed evidence that emotional and mental health experiences of participants who experienced controlling, but not physically abusive

partners were similar to that of women who had been battered. This confirms research by Estefan et al. (2016), Reed and Enright (2006), and Toplu-Demirtaş et al. (2019) who suggest that mental health outcomes from emotional abuse can be very long-lasting, likely due to relationship-created self-doubt and a sense of injustice around the abuse.

The current literature around PNT-INT dyads does not address the key themes related to the ending and aftermath of these relationships, namely PNT coping strategies, leaving, recovery, and gained hindsight knowledge. Participant narrative highlights are included below as a continuation of this chronological theme presentation in the absence of other research foundations to draw from.

Participants described a rich tapestry of coping and recovery methods that have helped them and are continuing to help heal from their relationships. The main key to recovery was adjusting their personal focus back onto themselves and prioritizing wellbeing. PNTs began to get back in touch with themselves; their needs, wants, likes and dislikes, and many learned to love themselves again. This was spoken about as an intentional process, which included therapy, research, labelling, routine, releasing and crying, and at times, medication. They spent time examining their own belief systems and reevaluating their relationships through a different lens. Part of this included accepting that this was an abusive or outside-of-the-ordinary relationship. It was heartening to be witness to the extent of positivity and future planning that existed around most of the end narratives. Several had started collecting proof of events from their relationships before the breakups, and this helped some to establish a renewed sense of trust in their own perceptions of events, as well as in recognizing INT patterns. Realizing that their former

INT partners conducted themselves this way in other relationships as well was likewise helpful to offload some feelings of fault and to reframe their partners' actions. Many participants committed or recommitted themselves to establishing and maintaining social boundaries, something which most admitted to not doing effectively in romantic relationships, and in some cases, in multiple realms. It was noted, however, that setting and implementing boundaries in the context of the PNT-INT dyad would have been ineffective in establishing a healthy relationship dynamic regardless.

Another major focus of healing took the form of creating space. Almost all participants distanced themselves as much as was possible from their former partners, some taking steps to move to different cities, to block all forms of contact, and to not release any contact information. For some, this was a way to prevent themselves from being tempted back into the relationship through the familiar wooing-deterioration-breakup-makeup cycle. Upon achieving some distance from the relationship, participants communicated feeling increasing clarity and having a more objective or wider view of the relationship to process events. Participants reported this space allowed for feelings of self-efficacy, independence, and freedom to regrow. Some spoke of feeling like they could "breathe" again. A sense of independence was formed, often beginning pre-separation, by going back to or getting a new job and going to school which gave validation and more financial autonomy.

While a few participants did have quality ongoing support throughout their relationships, many were disappointed by how family and friends distanced themselves or how they had let these relationships fall away in favor of serving INT demands. In the

case of a few participants, they had been rebuilding their networks gradually before the relationships ended. It was at the end point, however, that support people were mainly able to step in with increased levels of understanding and care. The narratives from this stage were filled with examples of confessions of what others had seen in terms of egregious INT behaviors that people did not feel able to share while the relationships were ongoing. Many participants had sourced other individuals or groups who had deeper understanding of the PNT-INT dynamic and were able to take comfort and learning away from these. An unexpected source of support was often derived from being with a new partner. Most new partners presented a vitally healthy contrast to the behaviors and treatment that they had experienced with their former partners. This assisted with the ongoing struggles for fighting decreased self-worth and INT-embedded low expectations of romantic partnerships.

A desire to mentor or model for others prompted healthy change for several participants. Often this was due to considerations of parenting wanting to show their children (or future children) examples of healthy relationship dynamics, however, others were mentoring children in different ways, or co-workers and friends in similar situations. Volunteering and sharing seemed to be cathartic and allowed increased mindfulness around their own strength and resiliency.

Hindsight

Almost all participants report feeling that they are now in a much better place in their lives. Almost all have spent a great deal of time actively taking steps to heal themselves and expressed relief that their relationships terminated. A couple of

participants are still trying to make sense of the hurt and bewilderment that they feel, which seems to be quite connected to the abruptness of the end of the relationship and a strong sense of rejection. Most participants have worked on learning to trust their instincts again and getting back in touch with their own feelings, to varying levels of success. Being mindful of not caretaking other adults was noted as a particular focus, and the majority of participants feel that they are now better equipped to communicate their needs, to speak up and protect themselves first. Some are actively rejecting justifications or excuses for others' negative behaviors. Importantly, several participants spoke about giving the self grace and forgiveness for not having protected themselves, and about learning to admire those parts of themselves that were taken advantage of by their partners, such as a capacity to love deeply and unconditionally. Other growth and strength areas mentioned include refusal to take responsibility for others' emotional states, less self-doubt, recognition of strength and resilience, ability to be alone and enjoy it, allowing the self to be "louder", to be angry, and not needing to hide the self. It was highlighted by a few participants, that while their PNT-INT relationship was a terrible experience, it also represented a trajectory for them that ultimately promoted intense personal growth in the aftermath, primarily due to self-examination and a loss of certain forms of innocence around relationship dynamics.

It was observed that one of the most important factors for PNT participation in this research was to provide information and education for others. This was with a view to preventing other people from having to experience the same kind of difficulties or trauma because of deeper knowledge of the PNT-INT dynamic, and so that helping

professionals can better recognize the PNT experience through symptomatic expression. There was a desire for people experiencing this kind of relationship to have better tools to identify and label behaviors and events, as well as their own emotional experience. Many participants observed that most people use the term “narcissist” without understanding what that actually entails; that it goes far beyond a basic self-centeredness, and that the experience can be incredibly manipulative, insidious, and covert.

Wisdom

All participants had specific messages to readers or personal learnings (conveyed within the Theme section), and the general conclusions are relayed here.

Education. The most emphasized set of points that participants wanted others to know about the PNT-INT dynamic is that education and training is sorely needed for helping professionals, as well as professionals within the court system specifically relating to the unique relationship characteristics of this dyad (narcissistic behaviors, manipulation, and abusive tactics, including coercive control). Many participants sought help but found that it was ineffective, especially due to their partners’ charming or victim façades, turned a blind eye, or lacked mechanisms to protect against or assist with the type of manipulation and machinations of their partner, even when INT behaviors were identified. In addition, specialized support was largely absent throughout the relationships and beyond, suggesting that there is a dearth of understanding about the true depth of impact of narcissistic behaviors on partners. Most indicated that had they known more about what narcissism truly entailed in terms of behaviors and effects on partners before entering their relationships, that they could have identified far earlier on the unhealthy

features of the dyad and perhaps taken more informed steps to prevent their loss of self or even the relationship from happening. For instance, Eleanor pointed out that regular helping strategies will not work with this type of dyad and that resources need to contain specialized information. A few educational realms that were suggested beyond the PNT-INT dynamic entailing education around empathy, both teaching it as a skill and the ability to identify it (or the lack) in others, as well as how to understand and pursue instinctual feelings. It is a very real phenomenon and not just “in their head” (Robin).

Personal Strategies. The second-most emphasized aspect of wisdom and learning that participants spoke about was the speed at which they became enmeshed with their partners. It was proposed by many that taking time to heal between relationships and taking the time to really get to know their partners to observe more closely their words and behaviors may have changed the trajectory of their relationship or it may never have begun in the first place.

Additionally, a crucial idea participants wanted to impart to others, before and while entering a relationship, was to trust your instincts. If something feels wrong, sit with it, take your time with the feeling, and honor it, don't discard it, even if you can't make sense of it at the time. Sometimes gut feelings could be judged by comfort level alone. It was important to participants for others to know that accepting and admiring one's own worth and building up self-confidence or esteem is critical before engaging in a relationship. It is equally as important to not lose sight of oneself in service to a partner and to listen and watch carefully to what they are saying and doing. A piece of this particular puzzle was the emphasis on knowing one's own boundaries and the importance

of making the self a priority (including personal feelings). To not do this, leaves one vulnerable to these types of INT characteristics. Certain behaviors in a relationship are simply unacceptable, and it matters not what the motivations or reasons are behind them. It is important to not excuse them away, but to evaluate their effect on the self and sense of worth, and if this is negative, to just leave. It will not get better. This also means always maintaining resources available for the self, financial, logistic, and socially.

A necessary part of healing from these relationships was learning to retrieve the self or to create the self in a new and positive way. As well, to forgive the self and to know that everything will be ok and that a person going through this can get to a healthy place. This means trusting the self and pushing through to something different, even with a fear of being alone or of the unknown.

Relationship Strategies. Many of the participants now identify that they look for reciprocity in relationships, and that if a relationship of any sort does not have a certain amount of balance, that it is a big red flag. Relative equality rather than subservience was a characteristic that was occasionally mentioned in relation to this. A few participants realized post-relationship that they would have chosen different life trajectories for themselves, but early on had only had exposure to only a certain set of ideas. This meant that they not only felt trapped in the relationships as they were, but that it was extremely difficult to imagine any other options. Exposure to alternative ideas of what one could be choosing as opposed to what one “should” be doing would have been helpful to end their relationships sooner. One does not have to fight for a relationship at all costs if it does not fit or is a negative experience. As well, help and support can be available if one is willing

to seek it, even if it is not obviously present, which assists in not returning to negative relationship situations. It is important to open-up with vulnerability and to let people know what is really happening in your relationship.

For those participants who share children with their former partners, and thus have to maintain contact, they have learned that it is important to respond, but not react. This includes understanding that INT actions have nothing to do with themselves and that the dynamic can be depersonalized. Boundary maintenance is an important and ongoing task for these participants.

From the outside, observations of the PNT-INT dynamic can sometimes appear that one partner is perfect or very salt-of-the-earth, but the other is either invisible seeming, strident and suffering, and/or doing all the background labour. One participant observed that there may not be overlapping social circles, so that different groups of people could not compare notes to understand the truth.

Partner Characteristic. One of the most critical learning pieces that participants mentioned was that it is the INT who was highly problematic, not themselves (at least to the degree that they took responsibility for). Most of the participants still wonder if they fully know what was behind their partners' façades. This came as a relief to some participants in that if they could never truly understand why their partner operated in the way that they did, it meant that they themselves were wired differently and in a more positive way.

In hindsight, a lack of partner-orientated empathy became more and more obvious, even for those INTs who cultivated an altruistic persona. Almost all the

participants spoke of the realization that they could never truly understand their partners' motivations, but that their actions were far more strategic than they ever appreciated during their relationships. Many identified that the main goal appeared to be complete power and control through eliminating the PNTs' connection to their own identities and making them feel lesser-than. Participants saw their partners as innately highly skilled manipulators making it very difficult to identify discreet moments of maneuvering. As Brooke stated, "It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter how smart you are, if you have an education. It's a game."

Unique Experience. Participants wanted others to know that the PNT-INT dynamic contains a unique form of abuse based on a cluster of the specific INT partner characteristics. The combination of skills in the observational and interactional realm paired with the ability to exploit without seeming like someone who exploits was frightening for many participants. Many observed that the term narcissist is overused and regularly not properly applied by the average person. There should be a distinct understanding between the colloquial usage (describing someone who is selfish, for instance) and the true meaning of being partnered with such a person. Professional help became such an essential step in healing for many because of this.

It was also observed that many participants felt uniquely placed, in work and personal lives, to be able to help with others who were in similar situations because of the lack of understanding that PNTs face when going through partnerships such as this. In fact, Megan stated, "I definitely would not be where I am today without that experience."

This statement also highlights the positivity and growth mindset that most participants endorsed post-breakup, which very likely accelerated their healing.

Limitations of the Study

As discussed in Chapter 3, the research narratives are focused on the PNT lens which in the screening process required partner-reported information about INT partner behaviors and beliefs in order to establish a baseline for trait characteristics. While partner-report has been shown to be an acceptable form of data collection in academic research, PNT assessment and narratives of the INT partners could have been colored by experiences in the relationships that potentially would be interpreted differently from an objective or clinical assessment. There exists the possibility that memory and intentionality can be selective. In a sense, however, this is also a strength since the PNT perspective is the focus of this research and thus the important voice, regardless of the facets of participant interpretation.

While it was anticipated that purposive sampling, limited time, and resources constraints would limit the scope of sampling to a more specific geographic area, the inclusion of the possibility of Zoom interviews (due to Covid-19 concerns), as opposed to solely in-person settings allowed for a wider geographical net for sampling. However, while participants were spread across this larger geographical area, some homogeneity did occur in the sampling. Though various attempts were made to include a diverse sample population, including online advertising and in a variety of physical settings, only potential participants who had been involved in heterosexual relationships volunteered. As well, very few male-identifying individuals volunteered, and only two either qualified

and/or continued to the interview stage. Education levels and socioeconomic status had more diversity within the sample population, however, could be considered somewhat homogeneous as well. Overall, participants were relatively educated and financially stable. However, there is a possibility, as discussed in this and the previous chapter, that this element of heterogeneity could relate to the specific dynamics of the PNT-INT dyad, rather than sample selection. Additionally, an unanticipated (although unsurprising) consequence of requesting mental health professionals to post the volunteer flyer in their offices, is that a few of these professionals volunteered themselves. While age ranges, cultural and racial backgrounds, and length of relationships were somewhat diverse among participants, these experiences were not representative of the entire population of individuals who might be partnered with INTs.

While working as a Clinical Counsellor, I encountered clients presenting with concerns based in similar dyads. This meant that I spent a great deal of time in examining both work-related and any personal assumptions and biases to separate any preconceived notions from the current data as it evolved. However, this is by nature a subjective experience, and while all reflexive attempts were made to challenge and eliminate my expectations, interpretations were formed with this previous experience as a backdrop.

Despite the contribution to the knowledge pool regarding PNT experiences of partnering with an INT and the PNT-INT dyad for education, research, and clinical professionals, caution should be exercised in terms of transferability of the findings to other populations.

Recommendations

The most common refrain from participants, in terms of their motivation to complete this study, was that they wanted others, in particular mental health professionals, but also the general public, to understand what it truly means to be involved in a relationship with an INT. Most felt that the use of the term “narcissist” is commonly thrown around to describe a vain or selfish partner, and thus there is little understanding of the genuine impact of INT behaviors on their partner. As well, there is little understanding that what takes place in these relationships is highly emotionally abusive, but often subtle and cumulative. The current existing research that has existed until now typically focuses on the INT and/or limited quantitative data, meaning that this unique and broader picture of the experience of partnering with an INT has been ignored.

Specifically, these damaging behaviors may be better identified in clusters and categories including examples of control or coercive control, particularly financially, patterns of lying, willingness to represent their partner as the only one at fault, desire to take center stage, either through extreme gregariousness or victimhood, and a partner who extends themselves to be agreeable or giving, showing high degrees of frustration, and who may be isolated from supports. Examples of vindictive behaviors are particularly important to monitor. Clusters of these types of behaviors on either side should result in increased investigation.

More research needs to be completed from the lens of those affected by the narcissistic individuals in their lives so that these phenomena can be understood and responded to from a survivor-informed perspective. This is particularly crucial in terms

of individuals maintaining partnerships with INTs since they are often the closest intimates and the most impacted by negative behaviors (Day et al., 2019; Foster & Brunell, 2018; Lamkin et al., 2015; Määttä et al., 2011).

An important recommendation for future research would involve the expansion into more diverse populations, cultures, and geographical bases to help verify findings or to develop new avenues of inquiry. Other genders and sexual orientations, as well as increased diversity for socioeconomic statuses should be considered, for example. It is entirely possible that some of the commonalities that were found in these findings resulted from having some available resources (personality, logistical, community, or financial) that other individuals in similar situations may not. In this vein, a possible area of exploration could be the impact of previous trauma or family of origin histories as well. In this research, there was a diversity of these histories, yet a highly common set of dyadic narratives whilst in the relationships. Parsing apart some of these variables may or may not prove fruitful.

Various concepts found within the data would benefit from quantifiable testing. For example, participants here described themselves as agreeable people, or helper type personalities, however, some existing quantitative research has suggested that there can be a homogeneity of narcissistic characteristics in such relationships (Lamkin et al., 2015). This contradictory set of findings deserves a deeper dive using previously untested variables such as the length of time the relationships persist, demographics, or ages of participants versus PNT personality factors, for example. Often much of the quantifiable

data has come from university-age populations with potentially noncommitted or nonserious relationship formats.

A few missing variables from this study which might prove fruitful in the qualitative, quantitative, or mixed arenas are to look at those partnerships which do not end, that have persisted through much of the adult partner's lifespans. The participants in these specific narratives all had a discreet ending to their dyad story, and that in itself was a shared experience. In addition, this study did not include participants who had experienced chronic partner-violence, nor INT related criminal activity as a major feature of their relationships. Presumably the set of experiences that would be generated by these features could potentially provoke their own avenues of exploration.

With the detailed PNT descriptions of these above experiences, it will be possible to develop research, relay psychoeducation, and test clinical interventions that are PNT-INT specific, from a place of deeper understanding and knowledge. This may be of crucial assistance to PNTs who are confused or experiencing decreasing wellness during their relationships, who may want to exit their relationships and not see a way out, or who are looking for tools for recovery. This should include work directed towards recovering a sense of self and self-esteem building. Emotion-focused and concrete-based therapies paired with family systems investigations would likely be valuable here.

The findings from this study will be reported to clinical practice groups, submitted to research publications, and potentially other forms of publication and conferences. My hope, prompted by participants' wishes, is that this information represents a strong entry into academic acceptance of the unique phenomena associated

with partnering with an INT and will thusly be widely disseminated and generate additional research.

Implications

In terms of social change opportunities, it is imperative that educators, clinicians, and policymakers in the psychological field have access to data that is not just about treating symptomology of pathologies, but for understanding and treatment of those involved in the social systems around the pathologies. As is seen in these findings, impacts can be severe for the partners of INTs, and this information has been previously rarely acknowledged nor disseminated from an academic perspective.

An increase in education and propagation of the data and findings will serve to allow survivors a stronger basis of understanding and support, from social, community, court, and clinical perspectives. In conjunction, decreasing the isolation and shame felt by PNTs by allowing for alternative options and belief systems to be available, prompting greater avenues of choice and wellness. If, for example, the greater public had access to credible information about the true nature of partnering with an INT, loved ones of PNTs might be better able to provide safety related to the vulnerability involved with confessing the true nature of the emotional abuse, or might have more patience with the concept that this form of abuse is insidious and cumulative rather than one-off, obvious, or violent episodes. They might choose to look beyond the INT's outward façade, and rather, focus on the wellness deterioration that they might see in the PNT as a measure of the health of the relationship.

With deeper understanding of PNT-INT dyads, the use of labels such as “narcissist” might cease to be so commonly and widely applied in casual vernacular, becoming more accurately applied, for instance, in circumstances where individuals have dealt with seriously damaging relationships and all that these behaviors entail. This research also demonstrated that it behooves community and cultural systems to encourage belief systems that perpetuate choice and alternatives around the concept of romantic partnership, even if only in certain types of exceptional circumstances.

Mental health professionals, especially in the counselling field, are likely to come into contact with individuals who are or have experienced partnering with an INT, as is evidenced by the above findings. It is vital that clinicians have competency to first recognize the PNT-INT dynamic and secondly to apply psychoeducation and interventions that are meaningful to the situation. As is suggested in the above findings, many clinicians had difficulty identifying the roots of the dyadic difficulties or took years to uncover the nature of the potential pathology involved. Couples counselling was often an initial avenue of sought help (and was spectacularly unsuccessful), and the approaches typically focused on the assumption of egalitarian or joint responsibility. What these findings suggest is that clinicians must rapidly determine when there are exceptions to the traditional “dance” of partners using very nuanced information and a layered view of partnership roles. This requires new forms of education and training based on changing focus from simply understanding the pathologies, to being able to assess behavioral and emotional outcomes for partners. The above narratives give a starting place to examine these possibilities with deeper understanding and knowledge. There is also the possibility

of digging into participant examples of resiliency and successes to inform these starting places, since most of these narratives resulted in positive outcomes overall. The social impact of providing access to these detailed tools could be vital in replicating progress for others experiencing similar dyads.

With further understanding of the issues involved, educators and clinicians may be able to help normalize the feelings and choices that PNTs have or make during their relationships, which in turn may help to reduce the confusion, shame, and isolation that survivors might carry, and may change the viewpoints of those observing. One of the largest discernable impacts from the dyads upon participants was related to their sense of self, particularly to esteem or worth. This research demonstrated that messages which serve to promote attention to one's own "gut" feelings (instincts) and boundaries around agreeable/helping behaviors (protecting one's own time and energy, and mindfully knowing what one is willing to give) could become highly accepted and prized from a societal perspective. This is possible the more that these issues are discussed, understood, and put into practice specifically within relationships.

This research shows that it is also imperative that those involved with legal and court procedures understand that certain personalities can be spectacularly skilled at presentation, and that emotional abuse can be extremely subtle but just as damaging as physical abuse (Dye, 2020), not just on partners, but also any children caught up in parental divorce procedures.

The primary messages from participants are that it is vital that these dyads be viewed as unique from "typical" relationship dynamics, and that they are treated as such

in terms of understanding, support, and recovery strategies. Participants wished for greater understanding of the true nature of the emotional abuse and deteriorating wellness outcomes so that it might prevent other people from having to experience these dynamics over a long period. As well, so that the general public might know that narcissistic characteristics encapsulate much more than just a tendency towards self-centeredness, and that the word “narcissist” should not be used commonly or lightly.

Overall, these participants’ stories may give hope to others who are or have experienced similar relationship dynamics, remind them that they are not alone, and that it is possible to move forward into wellbeing without their INT partner. These are stories of resilience and strength after experiencing confusing and detrimental partner behavior.

Conclusion

This research relied on narrative methods of inquiry to explore the experiences of former partners who have been in a long-term relationship with an individual who exhibits narcissistic traits. All participants within the sample group were adults in a formerly committed relationship of at least a year. Narcissistic traits were identified via partner-report assessments and met a specific threshold.

This examination of participants’ experiences of being partnered with an INT exposed that there is currently very little common knowledge surrounding the true nature of the stages of a narcissistic relationship and the emotional abuse that partners experience. This is meaningful because most participants were not forearmed with preventative knowledge nor methods for which to make sense of events of the relationship. This knowledge must be generated by well-executed academic research,

followed by education of psychological professionals and general dissemination. This will help to prevent some of the isolation akin to what participants described, related to their feelings of shame around the relationship and the feeling that no one would truly understand or appreciate the severity of what they had been going through. Some of the data uncovered evidence that may challenge certain current research, such as the concept of homogeneity between the actors in the PNT-INT dyad.

The morphing from the “perfect” or “persuasive” partner who often wooed participants by doing and saying all the right things into someone who strategically and subtly undermined and took advantage of participants’ prosocial relationship behaviors created immense confusion that perhaps could be alleviated for future individuals who have been exposed to knowledge of how to identify patterned behaviors of this nature early on. The relationships were characterized by a push and pull dynamic in which the INTs’ behaviors rapidly became untenable; however, they were skilled in pulling their partners back into the relationship through temporary and insightful behavioral shifts. This eventually became a patterned cycle over time with increasing peaks and valleys, degrading participant self-worth, sense of self, and sense of perspective all the while.

Also, the therapeutic experiences of participants reveal the importance of individual knowledgeable therapy and a great opportunity for increased education and understanding around the PNT-INT dyad. Clinicians require helping tools that can specifically address identification and issues behind the INT mask so that these dyads are not treated with the same reciprocal interventions common to couples’ therapy. This requires a closer look at partners who present clusters of personality traits and symptoms

such as what participants describe, for example, agreeable, competent, helper-type people, who may be simmering with frustration, anxiety, and difficulty expressing or identifying the problems. More probing may uncover the eroded sense of self, difficulty with decision making, self-doubt, shortened focus, feeling stuck in the relationship and learned helplessness, social withdrawal, imbalance of emotional and logistic responsibility, financial and emotional abuse (primarily suggestive controlling language, blame and discrediting, incentivizing and punishment, and trust erosion), shifting boundaries, and confusion.

What was truly interesting about the coping and recovery process across participants is that nearly all considered themselves to be in a stronger place, most felt, than ever before. It appears that that these experiences greatly accelerated learning about the self and personal limitations in relationships. Almost all participants endorsed positive or forward-looking mindsets, which appeared to be linked to wellness. Participants learned to focus more on themselves and turn their energy and giving tendencies inward, to distance from relationships that were toxic, increasingly engaging with support systems, and to take steps towards a future with themselves as the central actor. For the couple of participants who were having a difficult time recovering, it seems that continued proximity to their former partners, past similar traumas, barriers to financially recuperating, or more recent breakups may be interfering factors.

The nature of qualitative, and narrative research more specifically, is that it provided the opportunity for a wider examination of peoples' first-hand accounts of how they have been affected by their partners' narcissistic traits. This allowed space to

confirm certain behaviors and outcomes but also to identify more unexpected patterns from participants' own voices. The data, however, is derived from one perspective of the dyad, and while generally this has not been a perspective that has been offered in academic research, it inherently involves a certain lens, and is thus both a strength and limitation. Logistically, limitations to wider demographic selection occurred. In addition, to capture the full trajectory of the relationships, this research focused on those participants who were no longer in the relationship, which may potentially be people of a certain subset of characteristics and experiences.

This research demonstrated that there are massive commonalities in experiences across this participant pool, regardless of certain demographic diversities. While this qualitative examination cannot be generalized to larger populations with certain confidence, it is a platform for future examination, especially quantitatively. This might include testing the clusters of personality variables, behavioral and/or mental health tools and outcomes, or long-term PNT-INT dynamics as distinct from short-term relationships, those that are less committed, or those which do not have a finite end point. More investigation is needed so that it may be possible to develop skill sets around identification of relationships that are highly emotionally abusive, but subtle and cumulative in nature. This would be of value to educators, clinicians, and the general public. Of course, this research should also extend into wider and more diverse populations to either confirm or to set parameters around the current findings. Importantly, these stories of resilience and strength provide a great opportunity for the development of research-based strategies and interventions to be made available to

individuals who might be treating or experiencing similar situations. May the finding from this research provide hope to those experiencing this unique form of emotional abuse, and a knowledge base and understanding for those who are educating, helping, and supporting the people experiencing it.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

What are the main experiences that you remember about your relationship?
What stands out the most for you about your relationship?

What kinds of things did you do together as a couple?
How did you feel about these activities?
How did your activities together change throughout the relationship, if they did at all?

Can you tell me a little about why you decided to date your partner?
How did you meet?

What was your relationship like at the beginning?

What did you notice that might have changed over time in your relationship?
What do you think stayed the same?

What was your experience of family and friends' support throughout the relationship?

How would you describe how things were going towards the end of the relationship?

What kinds of things did you learn about yourself as time went on in the relationship?
How would you describe yourself at the beginning?
How would you describe your ex-partner at that time?
How about towards the end? What kinds of personal changes (if any) did you notice over the course of the relationship?
Was there anything unexpected about how you felt about yourself then?
What did you learn about your partner?

How did you cope after the breakup?
What kind of support did you have at that point from family and friends?
What was happening in the rest of your life at that time?

How do you describe yourself as a person now?
What has changed about how you view yourself since the experience of the relationship (if anything)?

What thoughts do you have around how long the relationship lasted?
What factors contributed to how did the relationship ultimately ended? (Was it your choice to end things?)
If you broke up more than once and got back together again, what did that look like?

(If participant precipitated the breakup) How long did it take between you deciding to end the relationship and when it actually happened?

Is there anything more that you would like to add about your experience that I might have missed?

Thank you so much again for participating in this interview. I really appreciate your contribution to this research. If necessary, is it ok if I contact you to arrange follow-up questions? You can always get in touch with me if you feel that you have more to add or change as well.

Appendix B: Condensed Participant Summaries

1-Madeline

Madeline and her partner had an on-off committed relationship for about three years. The relationship was initially colored by blurring relationship boundaries (his attempts to begin a relationship with her before divorcing his wife, a pattern that occurred later as well). Madeline expressed that throughout her life, she has prioritized other people before herself.

Madeline found her partner charming, smart, funny, and likeable, especially at first, but indicated that the qualities hid a nastier side. She expressed that particularly after the marriage took place, his true colors were being revealed.

The activities and conversations spent as a couple revolved around his interests and desires. Part of a method of control used by her partner was to put down the kinds of activities that she would have liked to engage in. Her partner disguised put downs and threats with humor, calling her “too sensitive” when she resisted.

Madeline noticed that her partner began to isolate her from her friends fairly early in the relationship by subtly indicating he looked down on them, and that his friends were more desirable. Madeline’s partner would track her behavior and express jealousy and anger when she would speak with other people, which gradually increased her avoidance/social withdrawal.

Another method of control appears to be intimidation and fear through anger. Madeline expressed that this would be scary and that she felt he was trying to get a rise out of her.

She characterized the relationship as, “push and pull” between wooing versus psychological abuse and manipulation. This worsened over time, and she describes this as, “I’ve never felt so poor in my life”, meaning in areas such as isolation (ex: friendship), spirit, and self-care (ex: eating & sleeping), even in comparison to a bout of homelessness in her past. This resulted in increasing self-doubt, justifications for his behavior, and romanticization of the relationship. Her partner tested and pushed her boundaries a little bit at a time in very covert ways.

Madeline had doubts about the relationship the whole time but did not verbalize them. She felt that she had to dim her own light (ex: “playing dumb”, “biting tongue”) throughout the relationship in service to her partner, especially intellectually, so that he could feel ok about himself in contrast. It became clear to her that he had a fragile ego. She feels that she “broke the relationship” by finally calling him out on his lack of logic in the way he blamed her for their problems, and in his lack of intellectual prowess.

Madeline stated that after her partner left, even while experiencing deep grief, that she could, “breathe again”, suggesting room to take care of herself and her needs, including gaining clarity. She indicated that since the relationship has been over, that she has maintained some friendships, however, still feels like she does not have much of a support system.

Madeline eventually began to admire her own personal qualities and to accept herself, and to learn not to cater to other people over herself. Counselling was suggested by her partner so that she could “fix” herself, however, it allowed her a source of reliable, experienced, and trustworthy support to work on self-esteem and confidence. This countered her mistrust of health professionals because she felt understood.

Madeline expressed that she is now happy and has made a number of achievements in her life that would not have been possible in the scope of the relationship due to constantly catering to the whims of her former partner. She now values her “freedom” highly.

2-Robin

Robin’s relationship with her former partner accelerated quickly into a mutual living situation, and at first the relationship was going well. Robin identified a beginning that was characterised by high levels of romantic gestures and wooing. Robin initially found her partner to present himself well and to be charming. Robin described herself as emotionally vulnerable with low self-esteem when she met her partner speculates that this perhaps made her a target for her former partner.

Robin identified some warning signs of early manipulative behavior designed to degrade her right at the beginning. Upon meeting, her partner stated, “I’m really happy you don’t look like your picture.” Robin stated that comments like this felt like a “hit to her self-esteem. Insults (sometimes disguised as motivators or jokes) and were characteristic of remarks that occurred throughout the relationship. If there were problems, it was Robin’s “fault”. She stated that this manipulation and degradation intensified over time.

Robin began to notice that her partner engaged in increased conflict behavior over insignificant things and participated less in communal activities. At some point she realized that she was the only one working full-time, but also the partner who took care of the running of the house. Much of his behavior and communication seemed to be driven by creating identity and status for himself at her expense. Or conversely involving her as a trophy, as long as it didn’t impede his need for gratification in the moment. In other ways the façade began to drop as time went on in the relationship and he grew more comfortable with his hold on her.

Robin’s partner used put-downs as a way to control her time and activities and steered her toward focusing on his own interests. Robin felt demeaned by comments such as,

“you’re embarrassing”, “you can’t even do it” and moved away from healthy pursuits in response. He used intimidation (subtle, implied threat of potential physical violence, rather than overt) as a form of control when other tactics didn’t work. Finances were used in service to his wants. This occurred even post-breakup.

Robin expressed that her partner would “gaslight” her and that it took some distance from the relationship to see it for what it was. She was accused of being “crazy” when she identified the behavior. His narratives of events would change to suit his purpose.

This and other behaviors served to decrease self-esteem and increase insecurity, which in turn increased reliance on the relationship. Robin feels that these behaviors were designed to keep her close while he was still able to behave badly. Robin could see that the psychological abuse was successful because her partner was skilled in how he would “undermine” her and because leaving felt like “losing everything”. She felt that this abuse was a conscious strategy of dependence. This led to continual questioning of her self-view and beliefs, as well as a decrease in self-esteem.

Robin would justify her partner’s behaviors and make allowances for the things that he said or did that felt negative because she felt he was skilled in shifting her perception of events. Many of these instances occurred when Robin requested something of him or was hurt by his actions or words. Red flags were visible early on but rationalized away. Partly due to her studies in a psychological field, Robin started to suspect that her partner had narcissistic qualities, which might have begun around the three-month period of the relationship.

Robin described her partner as someone who would take credit for positive things that happened in her relationship, even at the wooing stage, but would discover later that someone else had made the efforts on his behalf.

She noticed that support people stopped coming around because they didn’t like his relationship behavior. He actively encouraged this by driving wedges in her relationship to others.

Towards the last year of the relationship, it became more tumultuous. Put downs and covert suggestions of violence increased. Rejection amplified his negative behavior and she still felt him trying to exert control post-breakup through tracking and checking up on her.

Robin discovered after the breakup, that her partner had been lying and saying negative things about her to others throughout the relationship (but presenting a different reality to her face). Upon discovery of these comments, they did not make sense to her based on her perception of reality, nor to many of the people he had spoken to. Robin had to

explain what really happened to a number of people. Robin's partner was still trying to engage in a relationship with her while already in another.

Counselling helped to make sense of what had happened and to accept the abusive nature of the relationship. She feels that psychological abuse is harder to make sense of and label when in the moment because of a lack of distinct actions.

Having a community support system was of utmost importance, and the ability to talk openly about the relationship. Also, with some people, the shared and understood experience was most significant.

Trigger responses occurred post breakup and have sometimes affect new relationships, however, the contrast of the new partner's behavior helps to put the response in perspective. Robin has been able to test her resiliency and strength through the process and has been able to move on having learned new forms of boundary setting and healthy limits of trust. She reframed it as helping to build her into who she is today (based on how she grew past it). Robin has learned not to self-blame regarding how the relationship unfolded and that the façade hid the truth of his personality.

3-Kyla

Kyla began a relationship with her former husband at a young age, however, was fully independent. He is 7 years older than her, and it felt to her like he had figured things out and was stable. Kyla noticed very quickly that many of her supports did not like him but did not know why. He initially proposed an open relationship but would become highly jealous if she went out with someone else and wanted her to be available to him. Kyla accommodated him and they moved in together. People gravitated towards her ex and he was regularly the center of attention. Kyla was drawn in by the fun, adventure, and the interest shown by an older man who seemed to have wisdom and knew what he wanted. He would woo with fun and interesting activities.

Kyla's partner seemed to have 2 faces, one for her and one for others. This was revealed to her when he was comfortable that she was invested enough not to leave, such as after marriage and pregnancy.

Her partner made grandiose financial decisions for both of them without her consent. Kyla would let the issue go when it would crop up. He asked her to quit her job so that she could focus on getting his business going. They would stop spending money on activities that she liked to do in favor of his and she stated that her identity became that of a helpmate. He continued to spend money on himself, even though they were in debt (because his business was not financially successful). The result was that Kyla would not spend money on herself and thus have few opportunities for stress relief, while also carrying the feelings of financial insecurity.

Kyla noticed a few months into the relationship that her partner began to say hurtful/cruel things. He admitted on one occasion that he was trying to “push her buttons” when she confronted him with her feelings. Kyla realised in hindsight that this was a “big red flag”. She feels that most of his manipulations were a conscious choice on his part to get what he wanted. Invalidating her feelings was a typical tool. He would subtly imply that she was not doing enough or was not good enough.

As time went on, Kyla felt like she had less and less of a say in decision making. He would let her have her way when it wasn't important to him and so for a time, it felt balanced. With ongoing focus on her partner's needs, plus sustained invalidation, Kyla felt her independence slipping further away.

Manipulation/invalidation convinced her that she was over-reacting, that she could not trust her own feelings, that he was “never wrong”. He would not participate in her decisions or as a partner (ex: holding the baby so she could write a resume), leaving her with the work of maintaining the home and focusing on his needs.

At first Kyla was hesitant to talk about the relationship because she felt people wouldn't understand. People didn't see what was going on and thought he was a great guy. This served to isolate.

Kyla noticed the abusiveness was generational by observing the negative effects on her mother-in-law and recognized that she did not want to become like her.

Work helped to allow Kyla to regain her sense of independence, enough to tell him she wanted to separate, which became “ugly”. Her ex had lied to her support system that she was unstable, that she was depressed and that she might hurt herself, instead of telling people that she wanted to separate. She knew he thought she must be crazy for wanting to leave him and was attempting to manipulate and isolate her more. He refused to move out and once a court order removed him, tried to keep tabs on her activities, and required her to always be available to him. He became physically and sexually threatening and while not actually violent, the implied risk was there. Kyla became worried that he would hurt her. She received an emergency order and he lied again to paint her as crazy and dangerous, even though he had allowed her to be the sole caretaker of their son the whole time. He moved nearby (breaking the court order) and harassed her with texts about her activities. She felt he was always watching her and felt she had to leave the area. Kyla stated that she felt a lot of shame and guilt around the breakup because it was her choice to do so.

Kyla's states that her ex still denies that he did any of these things to her and continues to manipulate the truth.

Kyla stated that the main thing that allowed her to cope and recover was to get a job again. Also, when she met someone new, she was able to see the contrast in that she saw her value beyond just being a mother. With the space from her ex and the contrast, Kyla felt her self-esteem rise again. Kyla was able to focus on herself again, to make her own decisions, and to regain her sense of independence. Kyla was able to get back in touch with her “great” support network and one who was a counsellor has been particularly helpful in gaining perspective on the relationship. Her separation counsellor let her know that they had opposite intentions and that some distance was appropriate. Another counsellor pointed out that he refused to accept accountability and blamed her for everything. She was given materials about narcissism, which “turned on a light switch” for her. It was hard to believe the psychological abuse happened to her until that time.

Kyla no longer wants to be a “meek” person and is driven to seek her goals, however, feels that she wasted so much time. She has realised that it is not selfish to take care of yourself and would not have a partner like that again. Having her son helped her to say “no” to people and recognises that to take things on for others was a trait of hers from very early on. She believes this put her in a position to be taken advantage of. However, Kyla would find it hard to trust in another relationship and is afraid to lose independence again to the point where she has a hard time accepting help.

4- Mia

Mia found her partner to be unusually persistent in wooing her in the first stages of the relationship. She found herself to be swayed by his promises and the picture of the ideas that he would paint. Her partner had a charming and perfect façade that has allowed him to not just attract Mia initially, but also fooled counsellors and court related professionals.

Mia began to see red flags early on, such as flaring up over inconsequential things. This scared and confused her, but he would apologize and decide that it would be over. There would be no point for her to bring up the issue again because of fears of his explosiveness. The first time (6 mos.) that Mia noticed the “out-of-nowhere, crazy, escalated fight” was the first moment that she thought about leaving the relationship. Mia felt he would do a very good job of overcompensating and apologizing to smooth things over.

Mia described that her partner and his needs became central to their relationship, including spending time with his family rather than hers. This meant that her support system dropped away and she no longer had time for her pursuits. This switched over time in the relationship when he ultimately no longer spent time with her.

Mia went into the relationship believing in the romantic notion that a marriage is forever (“naïve”) and that she couldn’t be the first person in her family to get a divorce, which meant that she felt she put more energy onto the relationship to make it work than she

probably should have. She had moments where she contemplated leaving but felt that he would sense that and put steps in place to control the situation, such as proposing.

Mia noticed that her partner was very calculated socially (“every move he makes is for a reason”) and can now see the depth in which he treats people poorly.

Looking back, Mia was able to identify just how much control her partner had exerted over her life, “he always liked to control who I was around”. He would use tools such as double booking or would become sick when she had set up times to do activities with her friends so that she would stay home, rather than overtly ask or tell her not to go.

When challenged over lying, (for instance when cheating on her) her partner would call her “crazy”. Ultimately, she set up a video recorder so she could prove that she was not. Pregnancy was another opportunity for him to exert control. The negative moments were often not clear-cut, and so difficult to push against. Mia calls this “weaponized” psychological abuse that is not given enough weight by courts and other mental health professionals. She feels it is pervasive and damaging, but more hidden than physical abuse (“underground area”). Often it takes experiencing it to fully understand it. When people have seen it and understood it, there is a feeling of “release”, that “it is just not in my head”.

Mia felt that she began to extricate herself from the relationship when the power imbalance of the relationship started to shift. She had gotten a better job and had gone back to grad school, so was better educated than him. This meant that his controlling hold on her lessened. At the end of the relationship, Mia discovered that her partner had been cheating on her (which ultimately ended the relationship), but she felt that he managed to switch the blame back to her. She stated that in his mind, the breakup was her fault because she was the one who ended things.

Mia felt that she had to “blow things up” so that she would not keep getting pulled back in and she felt that she had to do this for her daughter’s sake. She did not want to teach her that the dynamics of a relationship such as this were normal. Mia persisted in leaving even though her partner exploded with threats and throwing things. While Mia was “terrified” she chose to call the police rather than stay any longer. Mia stated that she was in a state of “flight” for 2 months after leaving.

Mia and her partner went to therapy and mediation because he wanted to get back together and she wanted to learn how to co-parent together, however, the divorce process went on for 4 years. Counselling also helped her to realize that there was no hope for the relationship.

Mia has worked with a therapist individually over many years and feels that she has grown a great deal, and that a lot of learning and strength has come from that. Mia has

noticed, however, that the many professionals (from counsellors to court-related) have gotten tired of dealing with the relationship as well.

Mia felt that she has learned to reprioritize her relationships with her friends. Mia stated that her learning about herself and her strength was accelerated by having experienced a relationship such as this. When her former partner uses his manipulation tactics now, Mia has asserted herself by “looking him dead in the eye” and says, “That doesn’t work on me anymore”. Mia states that this can aggravate the situation, so typically she will just ignore him and remind him of court-imposed boundaries. Boundary setting has been particularly crucial in ongoing communications. Counselling and friendships have been important contributions to recovery. A parenting coordinator has been of service as well. Time and distance have helped to put more perspective to the relationship for Mia. She feared that she might become jaded from the experience in terms of trusting people, but what she has discovered is that the experience has allowed her to put healthy boundaries in place and she has learned to communicate her own needs. Mia has also learned to trust her own instincts more.

5-Claire

Claire was young when she met her partner and was engaging in higher education and working at the time. Her partner knew her boss and he was older with much more experience. Her partner presented as a gentleman, as well as being charming and a fantastic conversationalist. His job was intriguing, and Claire felt that he seemed to have his life together. He seemed to live a life of prestige.

While Claire was first living with her partner, the space was “his” and she was “living out of a suitcase” and eventually got her own drawer. Claire stated that she felt like a “visitor” in their home.

Claire was able to be privy to the two sides to her partner early on through observing his interactions through work calls and with his friends. Claire was soon able to observe that her partner would put on a persona when talking with others and that a more manipulative, aggressive, and harsh side would come out when it would suit his purpose. Claire observed that he would switch these personas within seconds when talking with someone new.

She would observe that he would regularly lie about others to colleagues and exaggerate to get what he wanted. Claire spoke of a lung cancer diagnosis that he would use to manipulate her with, and that to this day, she is not certain that it was not all an elaborate lie. (He would get sicker right after a conflict and would require something from her- so she would “stick around for longer” for example or would keep her separate from any contact with the medical system he was supposedly accessing). He ‘recovered’ abruptly after the breakup.

Claire sensed by the first year that something was off about the relationship. She also discovered that her partner had still been in a relationship with his ex for the first 4 years of their relationship. She felt a sense of distance in the relationship which led her to investigate and ultimately find out the truth. He explained it away by talking about his concern for his ex's mental health and while she mistrusted him at that point, he shifted into being much more attentive, so it was easier to excuse.

Claire felt that her partner needed to be with individuals who were "broken butterflies" in some way so that he could "rescue" them, while keeping them in a place where he could feel superior. This would be perpetuated through manipulation. Claire felt that he would often play the "victim" role to manipulate and place outward blame for his unhappiness, hatred, or negative events, regardless of his role in creating the negative situation.

Claire's partner did not have interest in meeting her friends and family, and they would "hang out" with his friends instead. Criticism of her friends would also create a barrier to her side of the social world. Claire reported feeling a sense of not "belonging, acceptance or comfort" and of "playing a role of girlfriend" when with his crowd so that she could appear more mature and confident.

Claire would feel unease around the activities that they would do, which generally involved things around the home, because it didn't bring her a feeling of being relaxed or joyful due to feeling like she was trying hard all of the time to fulfill the role of girlfriend. Claire also felt that she couldn't talk much to others about the relationship due to her partner's encouragement to having a "secretive" life.

Her partner would make covert messages about what she should be doing in the relationship by referring to his ex's or other women in judgement, for example. He would frequently use encouragement to support her towards something she wanted, but when she began to accomplish it, he would debate her about it, creating conflict and mixed messages which resulted in her feeling knocked down. Abusive language was often covert.

Claire parents generated specific viewpoints of what a relationship and girlfriend were supposed to be, including a concept of what the "good girl" looks like, and prioritizing her mom's mental health and wellbeing to keep things peaceful at home. Her mom would often speak for her because she was reserved or shy which created a sense of dependence.

Caretaking of her partner and his emotional state was a major part of the relationship. Claire also felt shame in leaving someone with a (supposed) cancer diagnosis.

Claire has learned more about her emotional & attachment traumas from participating in this relationship, which she attributes to staying longer.

- Her family of origin made the behaviors in the relationship feel familiar & safe
- Her insecurities were triggered & he seemed like the balm to that at first
- She felt a sense of elevated status from being with him- special to have been “chosen” by him
- Claire feels the relationship should have only lasted 6 months had she honored her instincts.
- He knew how to play on her strong sense of empathy to get what he wanted, including her staying longer

Claire felt secure when she realised that she could live without her partner successfully. This helped to address previous self-doubt. Seeing a counsellor helped Claire to recognize that things in the relationship were increasingly unhealthy, that she was being manipulated, that she was the recipient of his “bad moods”, and that she felt massive pressure to “manage” him and caretaker him.

Becoming educated was grounding and good friends helped her to cope during and after with important conversations. She created a nucleus that is “peaceful and safe”. Having a good and supportive new partner helped in recovery to see the contrast of a healthy relationship and to increase clarity about her ex-partner. Moving forward required cutting out him and his family completely out of her life. To do otherwise would risk ongoing manipulation.

Claire has gained strength in recovery. She has decided that she will not continue to fit into a similar kind of role that she has in the past and that she will not be responsible for others in the same kind of way. She will speak up and challenge when her instincts tell her to. She knows she can be strong without these kinds of sacrifices and acts of service (they aren’t required to be of value). Claire feels a sense of peace, comfort, and awareness about who she is and wants to be. Becoming a mom has provided a source of strength. Claire learned that it is ok to say “no”.

6-Megan

Megan was a young student and working part time at when she met her older partner. When they began dating, she had known him for awhile and had gone through a breakup, a move, and a career transition. Megan found the group of people her partner was with to be interesting, but that he was grandiose in terms of his physical appearance/image. His friends facilitated them getting closer and he began to love-bomb her by complimenting her, purchasing things, and introducing her to high profile people/events. Megan described it as feeling like she could take a “breath of fresh air” and “finally catching a break”. He seemed to notice things about her that others did not recognize.

Megan felt manipulated very early on. Red flags emerged as soon as their first date. She spoke of always feeling tested and that he would describe for her how she passed or

didn't afterwards, which encouraged or discouraged certain forms of behavior to suit his needs. This also took the form of subtle put downs. The "testing" with feedback-like compliments and put downs created an addictive cycle with a need for his validation & acceptance. However, Megan felt that he saw her as a "trophy" and that he believed she needed to do and be certain ways because she "represented" him. Megan felt that he made a show of demonstrating that he "got her".

Megan would assert boundaries and her partner would override them. He would control what she would wear, who she saw (including family), phones, the living space, what foods she ate, and would compare her to his ex (fitness model) which resulted in her developing an eating disorder. Continual comments about her body and losing weight reinforced this. Megan's partner caused her to be fired from her job. Megan was not drawing a salary at their business and had to take a loan out to support herself. Her life began to center around the needs of the business and her partner. Megan stated that she felt trapped and suffocated.

Megan felt shame around her relationship and did not share what was truly happening with friends, family, or even her therapist. Megan also felt protective of her partner and the relationship. This created a profound sense of loneliness.

Megan did not feel that she had the right to complain about the inequities of the relationship because he would make her feel like she was the one who had to try harder by subtly shaming her or withdrawing.

Megan and her partner broke-up and made-up multiple times during the course of the relationship and she describes it as one of predator and prey. When Megan would feel the need to start to pull away from the relationship, her partner would make grand gestures or future promises to pull her back into it. She felt he was very persuasive, and could base his strategies around how she reacted in a moment, including doing things that made her feel "like the greatest thing" in some moments. "Everything was crafted in a way to corner me".

When she would confront her partner on something she was unhappy with or wanted to change, her partner would turn it around to be her fault or tell her that she was making things up or was delusional. She also began to find items in their bedroom that did not belong to her but would act offended that she would bring it up and imply that she was crazy or had problems. In hindsight, Megan realised that he had been cheating the whole relationship. Megan's partner would tell her things that she knew were untrue, repeatedly insisting that they were and then shut down the conversation when she disagreed. To this day she questions herself, wondering if she is blowing something out of proportion.

Megan felt that her partner began to actively try to pit people against her to reduce her credibility and isolate her. Eventually he began to push her out of the business space

entirely to work elsewhere. Megan's partner could be angry or aggressive with her in one moment but become charming and pleasant as soon as someone else came near and she said that felt that she began moving away from trusting her own instincts.

Longevity was promoted by the promises of what the relationship and business could be, as well as a belief in the sacrifices required to build/maintain a relationship. There was also a fear that there would be no friends/family to lean on if the relationship ended (due to the gradual isolation of the relationship)

Megan felt that she was "an empty shell of a human" by the end of the relationship. She had to create "noncompromisable space", including moving out of town and severing ties to various activities to cement finality to the breakup. It also helped to take time to process and to create a new life. A new job created a sense of independence. Other people let her know after the breakup that they had seen what happened and validated her experiences. Megan took what she learned about the experience & turned it into a positive with her work. She grew from the experience, learned her value, and learned that she is capable under immense pressure, which helped to increase confidence. Having others recognize the unique experience of this type of abuse helps. "It puts you in a club that I know you don't want to sign up for. But it's an undeniable club".

Megan still feels that she sacrifices herself for others and that it is still a challenge for her to assert boundaries. As well, she is still deeply persistent in trying to make relationships work. However, she now sees herself as someone who is motivated, powerful in her career, passionate, intuitive, ethical, and protective of self and others.

7-Dawn

Dawn met her partner on a trip out of the country and got caught up in the romantic nature of the courtship. They married after 2 months because he convinced her that he would need the marriage to get a work permit in her country. Dawn observed that he was highly affectionate, wooed her emotionally with "extravagant generosity", and seemed like the perfect partner at first.

Dawn noticed that red flags began to appear as soon as 2 months into the relationship (around the time of marriage). He began to exhibit jealous behavior, but only in private. Because Dawn's partner was so jealous, she was not able to go out without his implied permission. She also noticed that people would not invite them out if there was a chance her partner was going to be coming along. She stated that this resulted in her ceasing to do anything. Dawn felt unable to discuss what was happening in her relationship with others, to admit what a big mistake it was, and how terrifying it felt.

Dawn made the lion's share of the income, however, her partner felt entitled to spend it with liberty, which meant that there was often difficulty paying bills. He was extravagant

in his spending behavior in contrast to Dawn who described herself as a saver. He would use guilt as a tool to get her to spend money on his pet projects of the moment.

Dawn described that many of the names that he would call her included “crazy”, “psycho”, “liar”, “whore” and telling her what a horrible person that she was regularly and how she made his life miserable. Dawn stated that would result eventually in her “cowering in a corner, crying with my hands over my head” and “not knowing how to get away”. Dawn stated that he treated her like she was always at fault, and he would refuse to take responsibility for any issues. He would also tell other people that she was crazy, which they would believe it until they got to know her. He would blame sex addiction and other addictions to explain his behaviors. This was patterned with other partners.

Dawn’s partner would use lies, name-calling, verbal aggression/jealousy, and threats to get what he wanted from her rather than asking directly (such as threatening to kill himself). He would also use FOMO (fear of missing out) as a tool, including about having a child. “He would plant the seed, and massage it, but not press it.”

Dawn began to see what her partner was “capable” of about three years into the relationship. That his persona began to have so many cracks that she could see what was below. “It’s a shocking realization that you’re married to a monster, and it’s terrifying because you don’t know what that monster is capable of because there is so many lies and inconsistencies.” She also learned that everything that her partner said was a lie. He would say he would have to work, but wouldn’t have money to show for it, for example. She also discovered that he had been having multiple affairs. When Dawn confronted her partner about his lies, she stated that was when the real explosive anger came out. He did not like to be questioned on his inconsistencies, expenditures, work ethic, or anything remotely seeming like critique.

Dawn would have to feed her partner’s ego to avoid blow-ups. Dawn stated that sometimes the build up was a predictable cycle, but often it was not. Dawn spent a lot of time justifying her partner’s lies to herself. She was more able to confront him once they separated because she stated that the space allowed for safety. “You weren’t having to sleep with the person who’s furious with you.” He was acting much more erratic in the last 6 months of the relationship. He was demanding and threatening more. Dawn stated that she thought he felt safer to do so because he had another girlfriend.

Dawn felt that she had made a commitment to her partner and that he was the father of her son, therefore, difficult to leave. She couldn’t see a way out. She also knew that it would be very expensive to divorce because she would have to pay him out.

Dawn’s friend group had decided that they all “hated” her partner and staged an intervention with her. A year and a half later, Dawn and her partner broke up because he locked her out of the house following a big fight. He was trying to get her to pay for a

flight to go to “work” (when it was actually where his girlfriend lived). Dawn stated that he had claimed long-term abuse to the police because she had thrown 2 glasses at him during the fight and police were called. She had to leave him with her son while she felt he was unstable. Dawn had nowhere to go but was able to sleep on a friend’s couch.

Her partner filed for primary custody claiming that he was the primary parent, facilitated by the fact that he didn’t make much of an income. Dawn states that in actuality, he was never around to parent. She became “terrified of what he could do” and with the thought of leaving her young son with him.

Dawn realised that he had a consistent pattern of behavior with other women, including “targeting” professional women who own property & have a good income, who present as self-assured & confident. Dawn feels that he then becomes intimidated by these characteristics & wants to “crush” them.

Dawn describes herself as more of a realist now around romance and that she is now more cynical. She has a recognition that “perfect” does not exist and that she is more tolerant towards that idea. Dawn realizes that if she had the ability to get some distance from the relationship, she might have been able to see who she was dealing with and could create a more clear way out. “In the middle of it, you don’t realize how bad it is until you’re out.”

She learned that “monsters exist, but not everyone’s a monster”. She has also learned from the experience but is not “wearing it”. She believes that she is still as accommodating as she was before in relationships, but “don’t fuck with me!”

8-Valerie

Valerie started dating her boss who was older than her. He seemed very mature, friendly and charismatic/charming, which drew her to him. Her partner persisted in wooing her even though she was with a partner already. His increased knowledge of her relationship with her previous partner allowed him to drive a wedge between them. At the time, Valerie felt that she was on an “emotional rollercoaster” and that she was emotionally vulnerable, especially after her breakup. He would shower her with expensive gifts and attention at first. She described herself as a “naïve, doormat”, and felt he had an awareness of her insecurities to take advantage of them. Valerie was aware that her partner was very quick to figure out her likes and dislikes and saw things that others didn’t. He would put her on a pedestal and seemed like a soul mate who truly “got” her. She noticed red flags even before dating.

Valerie began to see more over time behaviors relating to her partner’s temper. She saw verbal abuse to his employees, but he would justify these events away when challenged by her. Valerie would give him the benefit of the doubt. She observed this in their

personal life around 3 months into the relationship. This 3 month mark was also when other negative behaviors emerged more and more. She felt that he was no longer holding back (swearing, negative thoughts, intimidation, shouting- mainly directed at others, but also her). This was also justified away. She also began to see more of his sexist side directed at her and her capabilities. He also justified away inappropriate behaviors from a company client that was directed at her because it served a purpose for the company. Valerie felt this was a breach of trust. He would name call (imbecile, bitch, incompetent).

Valerie felt that her partner began to regularly push her moral boundaries in order to make sales and perform other duties for the company. Some of this and using her past dating history was leverage for him later on to introduce the desire to become polygamous. (He would bring hints up more & more over time) However, when she gave him an ultimatum about this, he threw a mug at her in the ensuing argument.

Rather than apologize for negative behavior, Valerie's partner would buy expensive gifts. This felt like bribery to Valerie's friends and insincere, however, she would justify that idea as him expressing himself differently.

Many people did not see the aggressive negative side of her partner and even some friends did not believe her stories about the verbal/physical abuse, infidelities, gaslighting, and his desire for a polygamous relationship. It was hard for people to understand what Valerie had gone through. He could be generous and charming, but aggressive and abusive when unhappy with her.

Valerie's friend pointed out to her that there was an imbalance in their relationship. He would discredit her, not acknowledge her concerns, turn friends against her and attempt to convince her that her decisions were poor...but not to worry because he would guide her and improve her with his superior knowledge. Valerie felt that she was walking on egg shells around him. Gradually Valerie's partner inserted himself enough into her life that he became "like a rock for me to lean on". He knew a lot about her & she didn't want to lose that connection.

Valerie had a friend who had observed his high level of aggression and rudeness in the community and warned her, but he claimed she must have mistaken him for someone else, that her friends didn't have her best interests at heart and were jealous of the relationship. Valerie felt it was important to forgive and accept his explanations. This friend would bring up that this was not a healthy relationship throughout the relationship. Because of this, Valerie stopped hanging out with her friends. Valerie rejected the term toxic at first but realized that it made sense when she was being disrespected and hurt. Valerie's mom, however, excused the behavior when she told her about it, even after the breakup and encouraged her to overlook the other women, because that was what wealthy men do. Valerie felt betrayed by this. Valerie's mom also scrutinized things like her

weight, which helped to set the stage for her partner to monitor her health. Valerie felt that he was “grooming her to be something that she was not”.

Valerie’s partner would not engage in activities that she enjoyed and would denigrate them in various ways, stating that his activities were better for various reasons, thus promoting a feeling of superiority/inferiority.

When Valerie was upset by her partner’s negative behavior, a common question he would ask was if she was on her period. Valerie felt gaslit at these times because when she would call him on that, he would tell her that he was just concerned about her health. When Valerie took issue with her partner’s behavior, he would turn it around and make it seem that she was the one with the problem and that she was just unable to understand, wasn’t considerate or compassionate, and was entitled, so he had every right to be frustrated.

Valerie caught her partner sexting other women and he convinced her that it was like watching porn and was no big deal. It turned out that some of the women were clients. Valerie began to catch her partner in more and more lies and he would become aggressive in defending himself, using denial as a tool.

Valerie had a panic attack on one occasion when her partner was verbally abusing her and her brother called an ambulance because she couldn’t breathe. She was told that it was due to a large stress and she then realised that there was something wrong with the relationship. She began to ask herself why she was still with him, “is this right, is this normal?” Valerie put her instincts aside & felt that she was blaming herself, insecure, that she was not in turn with her feelings. She would question herself in her perceptions of events.

Valerie told her partner that if they were to get married/have kids that they would need to be monogamous. Her partner suggested they take a 3 month break to evaluate. Valerie was clear that this was a break and that they were not going to engage in a sexual relationship (polygamous) while dating other people. He continually tried to violate that and would verbally attack the people she was seeing and harass her. This caused her to have to move elsewhere. He would continue to show up at her parent’s place and express concern for her health and safety. Valerie is aware that her partner has repeated this pattern of behavior with his new wife and a mutual friend. Valerie told family and friends not to give out her new contact information to protect herself from her partner. Having that distance has helped her to be calmer.

Valerie has now chosen a husband who is very opposite in many ways to her former partner. She feels that she now recognizes what is important to her and that she no longer has to play a subservient/compliant role (some of which is taught in her culture of origin). She feels now that she has a confident voice and that she is responsible for her own

thoughts and decisions (won't defer). Connecting with her friend who had an understanding of mental health journeys and toxic relationships helped her to recover. Distancing herself from her mother, adopting a belief that no one has a right to name call or tell her what weight she should be also helps. Valerie has now decided that it is crucial to trust her instincts/feelings. To investigate, spend time with them, write them down. She feels that important tools for preventing or helping people in these kinds of relationships would be solid research/education on narcissistic signs and abuse, and a place to get support and understanding. She feels that people can be tied into this kind of relationship because they may be financially bound, have kids, or are socially invested. Being independent in some way is crucial for leaving.

9-Ani

Ani was young when she met her partner and pursuing a degree at the time. They lived a distance away and got married within two and a half years of meeting. Ani stated that she "hated" him when she first met him, but put her instincts aside. Ani stated that she was drawn in by his charisma, he was attractive, and always had a lot of people around him. She stated that he was funny and "talked a good game". He pursued her heavily and was able to convince her that he would be a good, successful partner. Ani was perceived by others as bold, brave, and independent. She felt that way about herself until she married. Ani also considered herself to be too forgiving and an anxious attacher. She stated she would justify away her partner's negative behaviors.

During the marriage, Ani became aware that her partner presented a very different public image from the way that her treated her in private. As well, her partner wanted to present as successful but would not put effort into his success. He kept losing jobs which affected them gravely financially.

Ani grew up in a "very" Catholic family and develop certain belief systems around marriage. Ani started to feel that they weren't a good match at the point of becoming engaged, however this became much more apparent after marriage. Three months into the marriage, when she wanted to leave, Ani's parents told her that she was stuck due to these beliefs. She had been taught about specific roles and responsibilities, which allowed her to "put the blinders on" regarding the problems in the relationship and gave her partner what he was looking for, a dutiful wife. Ani stated that her parents taught her to stay in bad relationships because she saw them continually scream at each other.

They did activities that centered around his interests and friends at first, however, ceased to do things together after awhile. He would not participate in her activities & he would not agree to spend time with her even when asked. He was ambivalent towards things that didn't have to do with him.

Ani stated that her partner would present his opinions on what she should be doing (such as her role in the household) as if they were an opportunity for her. Ani stated that he would create pitfalls/speedbumps for her so that she would have difficulty in doing things that she wanted to do. Ani ended up doing all of the household work and her partner ended up unemployed much of the time.

Ani found that her partner was able to convince her that she was too independent, too focused on building a career, not family-driven enough. This caused her to question herself & to believe that many of their problems were her fault. Ani asked for a divorce as soon as she had confirmed her partner cheating. Her began to tell others what a terrible person she was and that she had cheated and taken all his money, despite multiple instances of financial abuse.

Ani felt that the relationship continued on for as long as it did because he was very good at cutting her down. It served to make her feel afraid to be on her own. In some ways she believed him, but also harbored the side of her that said this was not true, which was able to emerge again after the divorce.

Ani learned to trust her instincts and learned that she did not need to be so forgiving in relationship. Ani feels that she is back in touch with her bold, brave, and independent self. She will tell people exactly what she thinks now. She states is able to set strong boundaries within her relationships and is very mindful of not losing herself again.

Ani wishes that someone had told her that she did not have to go thru the traditional “conveyor belt” of marriage and motherhood.

10-Ava

Ava was young when she met her much older partner. She was employed and successfully showing a collection at fashion week. Her parents initially did not accept him due to racial differences. The relationship had many on again-off again periods. When she met him, she found him attractive and nice. Ava described herself as naïve at the beginning of the relationship and lost, Ava had developed relatively high self esteem by that point.

Ava’s family was Eastern European and had specific beliefs around roles and obligations in the family. Ava had very strict, military style parents and stated that her dad could be physically abusive at times. Her father had cheated on her mother, but then denied that Ava was his daughter. Ava grew up mainly with her grandmother.

Ava stated that she felt she would have to prove herself in the relationship, partly because of the age difference, but also because he would tell her that she was too inexperienced to “get it”. Ava’s partner would come home after days of being gone without

communication. Ava ended up in the ER due to a panic attack caused by high levels of anxiety. Her partner was involved with alcohol and drugs during that time.

Ava discovered erectile dysfunction pills in her partner's possession, which she knew were not being used when they were together. He would not communicate about this. Ava's friend let her know that he had asked her to be involved in a threesome. Ava chalked it up to his drug use. Friends told her that he was cheating on her, but she chose not to listen to that. Also, he would be out at night with signs that other women were involved. Ava stated that everyone thought the relationship was "perfect and magical", so even though she felt very sad, she stayed.

When Ava got a bit older, the party mode lifestyle was wearing thin, however, her partner still wanted to engage in that. Ava was becoming more career/goal focused while her partner was not. Ava felt the longer that she was around her partner, the less of a voice she had. When she would bring up an issue or feeling, he would twist it, rendering her confused. This happened fairly early on and Ava felt that she had been primed to accept this due to her upbringing.

Ava's partner would often use indirect suggestions and manipulations to get what he wanted, rather than directly telling her to be certain ways or do certain things. Ava realised much later that her partner had been gaslighting her during discussions/arguments to make her believe a different reality from the one that she had experienced. He would imply or state that she was crazy for thinking the way that she did about certain things.

Ava stated that there were many red flags that she had been oblivious to. For example, sexually he told her that it was important for him to be satisfied, but it didn't matter if she was. Ava and her partner started marriage counselling partly because they didn't really talk anymore or touch. She felt the relationship was cold and empty. The counsellor gave them the assignment to apologize to each other, however, her partner would not. He told her that he didn't feel sorry for anything. That was what gave her the inkling that something was not right.

Ava thought her partner was very negative (she realised that he would counter her positive statements with negative ones). Once she realised this was happening, she became more observant of how she was being treated and the responses she was given. Ava felt that she was in denial about the rough state of the relationship for a long time, partly because of her predisposition towards optimism. Ava would justify away her partner's behavior for a long time and attribute it to other factors in his life (his adoption circumstances/trauma, drugs/alcohol etc...). Ava thought that if she could just show her partner enough unconditional love, that he could lift himself out of his "funk" and become more settled (not needing to chase the next thing that would make him happy).

Ava believed that as long as he didn't hit her, that she should make the marriage/family work at all costs.

Ava kept the events of her marriage to herself and therefore, had very little outside support (besides her therapist). Ava and her partner mainly spent time with his friends and she did not notice that many of her friendships were deteriorating. Their other activities were also centered around him as well. Ava knew that his pet peeve was her discussing the relationship with others, so she did not. The one friend she remained close with she did not confide what was happening. Some of Ava's friends confessed after the separation that they had never really liked him but had chosen not to say anything (when they mentioned the cheating, for example, she would justify that away). They had noticed that she was not her carefree self around him.

Towards the end, Ava stated that her partner would mock her and yell at her in front of their kids. At one point during the separation her young child jumped in to defend her. Ava was starting to feel that the relationship was unbearable right around the time they bought their first home (to make her partner happy), which was 1 month before their separation. When she was trying to speak with her partner about feelings, he told her that she was, "full of shit". That was when she realised that she could not do it any longer.

In the final year of the relationship, Ava, began to do activities for herself again, was exercising, and was meeting people and developing a community. Ava began individual therapy and was given a book about co-dependency and narcissism/psychopathy. Ava realised that this not only applied to her partner, but also to her father. Towards the end of the relationship, Ava's therapist gave her a "personal bill of rights" which talked about how she had a right to her feelings and she realised then just how suppressed she had been, not just by her relationship, but also her parents. Ava describes that when she began to feel like the relationship would not work, she noticed a sense of "emotional indigestion". There was too much damage done and that she was done.

Ava describes the divorce process as "messy". Going through mediation, Ava saw just how much her partner had been hiding from her, including money and bank transactions. He told her that all of his associates thought she was crazy. She has become afraid on certain occasions (due to specific behaviors) that he would send a hit man after her and behaved in ways that made him seem like a "ticking time bomb". Ava's partner would do things like take pictures and video of her car and come into her home without knocking.

Ava still spends time second guessing herself and overthinking other people's behaviors to see if they feel like narcissistic behaviors. However, she has a new partner who does not have similar traits, which has been helpful in contrast. She began to gather strength in the termination of her relationship and the connection she had made in understanding that her partner had narcissistic qualities. Ava's self esteem had deteriorated over the course of the relationship, but after separation, she was able to build it back again. Ava also

learned to set more firm boundaries (and to know what they were in the first place). She will no longer allow people to treat her badly.

Ava's mother was also going through a divorce and they were able to discuss commonalities and particularly resonated with each other regarding the gaslighting that both of their partners engaged in. Ava states that what helped her the most was her therapist, books/research (narcissism, boundaries, relationships), and her church (community/spirituality). Ava stated that these were the things that helped her to get the most clarity on her relationship. The bible reminded her that one must treat others with love, kindness, patience, and gentleness, which she could see that her partner had not been giving.

11-Sophia

Sophia was close to breaking up with someone when she met her partner. She was doing a professional job but was also able to have a fun single life after hours. At first, she was not really attracted to him physically, however became attracted to his social ability ("social chameleon"), business savvy, confidence, and knowledge/intelligence. He was very concerned about his image, wealth, and connections. He also pursued her heavily and could be over the top with gifts and plans.

The relationship seemed perfect until the 3-4 year mark. He told her that he wanted her to "need him" and to "depend" on him, however, he would later use this against her when she did. He built her up on a pedestal and then proceeded to tear her down once he was secure in her feelings for him.

Sophia's partner was very good at hiding the negative sides of himself, especially at first. She realised later that she did not know what kind of depth that he could actually have because she is not sure what is behind the "act".

Sophia's partner would use humor (at her expense) to put her down. Sophia felt that he was strategically disguising his comments this way. He would make it seem as if she were at fault for things that were beyond her control.

Sophia had discovered that he had been cheating on her by walking in on him with another woman. He tried to deny it even then and instead tried to misdirect/manipulate and blame her for keeping a dirty house (therefore why would he have someone over?). He then also claimed that this woman was helping him because he had a cancer diagnosis (lying). She found messages on his phone that also proved that he was lying. He started threatening her with separation when she challenged him. For about a year and a half, anytime anything was discussed around this event or something contentious, he would accuse her of acting in a crazy way. "What is wrong with you? Why are you yelling?". She found out that he had started cheating 4 months after they married. It turned out that

he had also been cheating on her for years before that with other people. Previously she had never questioned when he would travel for work or was out with other people.

Sophia and her partner went to therapy together, but she found out that he would interpret what the therapist said for his own purposes. She stated that he would act like the model client and was a “social chameleon”.

Sophia is aware that her partner likely was lying to his mom about her and the events of the relationship because they were formerly close. This was confirmed by one incident where his mom blamed her and it was actually a lie told by her partner.

Her partner would claim that she was only successful in life because of him. Sophia stated that she began not to like herself as a person as the relationship progressed, that she was angry, and felt not driven enough. She felt weak because she had begun to depend on her partner.

Sophia noticed that the friends that he kept around were those for whom he could have some form of power over, and he calls them his “minions”. He would cut out anyone who challenged him in some way. After a large fight when Sophia was pregnant, her partner did not come home and then eventually told her that he didn’t love her anymore or respect her and that he was leaving her. This left her feeling highly vulnerable. She feels that this fight was strategic so he would have an excuse to leave.

Although she felt like she lost her “world” because of the breakup, Sophia stated that she was able to get more clarity after the relationship ended about how her partner had treated her badly. She realized how much anger he used against her and how he manipulated her. She felt “dead inside” when she found out about how 2-sided he was. She stated that she felt “robbed, stupid, and unloveable”.

Sophia attributes much of the longevity of the relationship to feeling “numb” (avoiding processing what was actually going on) to the point that she thought they had a good relationship.

Now Sophia feels strong. She was able to overcome all of this but stated that she has come back to being down on herself/self doubt. She feels cheated when she sees him flourishing. He had built up her self-esteem at the beginning and now has damaged it greatly.

Her partner has tried to get back together here and there and stated that he felt bad about how things happened, however, Sophia has identified that he still says, “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

It has helped to have supportive friendship, therapy and psychics/intuitives, and having her daughter (including the necessities of parenting= distractions). Sophia has dated a bit since the relationship as well. She feels that pieces of herself are coming back, although are not there yet. She is still feeling lonely without her partner. Closure would have been helped had he been able to acknowledge his treatment of her, however, she has realised that she would never get what she wanted/needed from him as a partner.

12-Dustin

Dustin met his wife in another country and after a few meetings a marriage was arranged by their families. Dustin describes himself as someone who always likes to be busy and to do for others. Dustin discovered that looks and image were very important to his partner. Dustin's wife and child are currently in another country and he does not have access to his child.

Dustin recounts how his wife presented much differently than he grew to know her as (simplicity, easy-going, soft-spoken, and calm). These were the things which attracted him initially. Dustin described how she would act one way in front of people and seemed to have a very accepting/agreeable demeanor, and that behind closed doors she became a completely different person. He noticed this about a month into the relationship. Their marriage counsellor eventually used the word "façade" to explain what they were seeing and that there was a potential diagnosis that needed to be made.

Dustin noticed that his partner's words and actions did not align, for instance, she would tell his parents that she was working on the marriage but was taking no action towards that. After a conflict, Dustin described how his partner would talk to extended family (and throw him under the bus) which would result in them blaming him, telling him he was misperceiving things, or telling him to try harder. Dustin stated that the effect of this on him was that he would question himself, "Am I going crazy right now?". He felt that she was willing to "mess with my head". She would deny talking with family, even thought they would somehow know the details of what was happening. She would use this as leverage against him.

When their marriage counsellor suggested that his partner would benefit from seeing a psychiatrist, his partner told him that there was nothing wrong with her and then told his parents that the counsellor wanted to have an affair with Dustin. She also threatened the counsellor that she would take her to court. Dustin began to realise that it would be impossible to move on if his partner could not accept that there was some work that she needed to do also to help make the marriage successful. Dustin felt that his partner put all of the blame for the problems in the relationship on him and refused to take any responsibility for it herself.

Dustin describes that he had no idea when his partner would “go off” like a “time bomb”. That she would create problems and require Dustin to take care of the aftermath. Dustin described that his partner would say hurtful things, but that she would minimize the damage and not allow him space to process. His partner would tell him that he was overreacting when he let her know he was hurt. For example, his partner would regularly find fault in his sexual abilities/technique, rather than giving improvement related feedback. Dustin stated that this caused him to panic and feel crushed. He spent a large amount of time researching how to do things better.

Dustin described that his partner believed that he was responsible for her emotional state and that he should be regularly checking in with her feelings, even if she already said there is nothing wrong. Dustin felt that he was doing his best to be cautious and not hurt his partner emotionally, but that she did not seem to care if she hurt him. He stated that his partner required him to take care of her, and that she would tell him that she believed she was entitled to it due to her external beauty. “She was just this goddess that had to be worshipped.” Her needs were placed central to the marriage and Dustin felt that she made no attempt to meet his, resulting in disagreements.

Dustin felt that his partner had no interest in involving herself in participating in the running of the household and that it was left to him to do so. The lack of interest extended to the care of their child as well. This resulted in him feeling exhausted all of the time and his behavior changed because of that. “I don’t feel like myself anymore.”

Dustin stated that conflict arose more towards the end of the relationship and often were regarding their child. Dustin felt that his partner believed that she “knew everything”, that her choices were the right ones, and that he should not give his input. He felt that he was pushed to the side in terms of decision making. He noticed that his partner would not take advice from people who had more experience or possible wisdom to share but would then complain about this to him.

Dustin felt that he had support from his counsellor throughout the relationship before people began to see behind his partner’s façade. Dustin stated that he “would have gone crazy otherwise” because his partner had painted herself as the victim and him as the bad guy. It became apparent that her parents enabled the behaviors.

Dustin was isolated from his supports, including his parents and best friend, because they would believe his partner’s stories of what was happening (because all they saw was her façade). Dustin states that his parents now support him and are beginning to recognize what occurred. However, damage was created in these relationships that is hard to repair. He felt that he had not been understood but that his family are beginning to and that he is feeling safer because of it.

Dustin now has voice recordings and various other evidence to support his side of things (conflicting with what his partner was telling people) so that he can move forward with a formal divorce and legal proceedings involving their child at some point.

Dustin has sat with himself to determine why he was willing to stay in an abuse situation. Dustin believes in the importance of working on the self and to do what needs to be done. His family was a model for making marriages work, even through difficulty. Dustin would spend time “covering up” for his partner because he believed that this was his responsibility as a partner. He stated that he did not feel confident about himself in relationships, that he was “not good enough”, had low self esteem and was “not worthy of love”. He relates that his positivity, spontaneity, goofiness, and liveliness were stripped away in the relationship and that he became “super serious”. He feels that there was a chance that he could have devolved into addiction because of the relationship and wanted to run away from the negative energy.

Dustin grasped that the end was there when he came to the realization that his partner would take no accountability.

Aside from regular therapy, journaling, self-reflection, and meditation helped to cope and recover. Labelling what was happening as narcissistic abuse was also very helpful because it highlighted that things were not as they seemed on the surface. Dustin said that he needed all of this because everyone was questioning him and that he was constantly having to explain himself so that he was not feeling safe with anyone. All this drained him, and these tools helped him to replenish. He also had one friend who was open with him and was not always questioning him which meant that he had space to think about how to move forward. Dustin has learned that he should not question his gut instincts and that he does not deserve abuse. He would promote self-love. He is now feeling like pieces of himself are coming back, as well as his self-respect. Positivity has returned.

13- Jessica

Jessica had retired from her career as a competitive athlete when she met her partner and moved back to her hometown. She was finding the adjustment difficult as she was having to create a new identity for herself and was moving away from the rigidity of training. She stated that she was not particularly confident about her next steps and had low self-belief. She was very determined to meet someone to get married and have a family, like her mom. Her partner lived a day away by travel so they had a long distance relationship for almost a year until purchasing a home together. Jessica found her partner to be charismatic, confident, outgoing, generous, and eager first. She felt that he “got” her in a way that others hadn’t. They enjoyed many of the same activities, and Jessica began to allow him to make choices for them as far as what they did as a couple together.

Until later in the relationship, Jessica felt that the difficulties her partner had in past romantic relationships were explained by him having not met the right person yet and that she was the right person. Jessica indicated that she had felt like she could make things work with anybody, if she could just figure it out, so all she had to do was put up with the behavior until she succeeded.

Jessica found herself making excuses for her partner's behavior and was doing her best to be flexible and relaxed, something that was also demanded of her by her partner. It was difficult to see the manipulations and abuse until the end of the relationship when things began to unravel.

Jessica stated that she ignored or avoided looking at the red flags for a long time. Jessica came to visit her partner in his town about 6 months into the relationship and the next day he unexpectedly left her at his house to go to work with no vehicle or a way to get into town. Jessica described that at the beginning, he would go out of his way to spend time, but that shifted to him always finding something "a little bit more interesting or urgent". The big red flags started to appear once they began wedding planning.

Jessica stated that her partner had an inability to take responsibility for problems. It was always someone else's fault. When confronting her partner about something he had done that was problematic, he would twist the blame and get angry at her in response. Jessica described this as "being spun around and dropped, and I had no idea which way was up." Jessica ended up questioning her own way of problem solving and was very confused that she went away from the discussion feeling like it was she that was the problem. She questioned whether she should have even gotten upset by that. She was also left feeling like she was the one "screwing up" all of the time.

Jessica was not allowed to have certain conversations with her partner's family and began to find it difficult to know what she was allowed to talk about and what she wasn't. This was perpetuated by his other family members as well. Jessica later realized that this was because of past misdeeds that her partner wished to cover up from her (financially, romantically etc...). Her partner blamed others for her not being able to talk about certain things, re: his brother, "he's got issues".

She noticed that he would spend a lot of money and would act like it was for her, but she then realized that it was about him. Jessica put a down payment on a home which was much more than she could generally afford with the promise from her partner that he would be paying the bulk of the mortgage payments. He did not follow through with this and offered excuses that seemed somewhat reasonable at the time. He would spend time "smoothing" out concerns, however, not directly addressing the actual problem. Jessica noted that she would often loan him money, which he treated as if it was a gift and never repaid. She intended these loans to help him get better control of his finances. Even

though she made much less than him (when he was employed), she ended up spending much more towards necessities than him (including the mortgage).

Her partner's generosity with his time and energy became more spaced out as the relationship progressed so that these things happened at his convenience. Instead, he began to require/expect more from Jessica, implying that she owed him because of his past deeds. Jessica noted a cycle of mounting difficulty/pulling away from the relationship due to frustration: him sensing it, followed by him wooing her back in again with gifts and generosity. Jessica stated that her counsellor described it as pulling the rug out from under her, never quite knowing when that would happen= being lulled into thinking things are ok and that she can relax again, and then it gets pulled out again for something unpredictable. It was out of her control, yet somehow even though it was his fault, it became hers. She felt that she was walking on eggshells, asking herself "What am I doing wrong?". This felt strategic on his part. Jessica describes this like being in a washing machine/blender of confusion- "not trusting myself, own instincts and my reality".

Jessica felt that her partner had learned how to keep people happy to get the things that he wanted and knew that he had to behave in certain ways to achieve them, but would not necessarily follow through once he felt those things were secure (girlfriend, house etc...). He would make promises to that effect (marriage & details), to keep her looking forward instead of at his actions of the moment.

Jessica has a strong support system, but she felt that many of them had been tricked, as had she. Jessica's mom and friends expressed concerns about her buying the home that she and her partner had chosen and gave advice that she should look out for her own finances. She chose to trust him. They also questioned why he had not given her an engagement ring and she justified it away. Towards the end, family and friends were encouraging her to leave him. One friend that they knew mutually let her know that the story she was relating about an argument was not ok behavior, which felt credible since this person had known him for decades.

Jessica's instincts were telling her that things were not right, however, she would push past those feelings. For example, when creating a scrapbook for wedding planning, one sticker that she had said "love", but there seemed to be no place for that. Looking back, she describes herself in this moment as "desperate" and while she knew "something was not right", she kept on with planning.

Jessica was aware about 17 months into living with her partner that the red flags were so clear that she couldn't continue. The last 3 months of the relationship were the most profound in terms of realisations, especially when people started to ask questions around their wedding/marriage plans.

At the end, her partner said to her (making sure there were no witnesses) that he intended on making her suffer because she broke up with him. He said “You did this, now you have to pay the price.” He continued with using the legal/court system as a tool against her for 3 years. He created a huge amount of expenses and debt around their house after having locked her out of it. Past girlfriends of her ex reached out to her to share common experiences and to offer support in court. Jessica describes getting out of that relationship as harder than performing in the 2 Olympic games she had been to.

Support of family and friends gave her the strength to get out of the relationship. Offering understanding but also a place to stay and not worry about anything else but leaving. The time away from him allowed her to come up with the words needed to leave permanently.

Jessica states that she feels more confident about herself, however, has uncertainty around being able to determine who is a “good human being and who is not”. She is unsure of who she can trust (particularly men). She believes that she has taken away some learning away from the situation and that although it was devastating and difficult, she can be positive and optimistic.

She came up with a routine for herself, which helped her to approach each day, including journaling first thing in the morning. Gentle movement like yoga, meditation, and prayer have helped. This allowed her to feel balanced/centered- “opening herself up before opening the curtains”. Counselling over the course of the breakup was helpful, particularly as her counsellor had some personal experience with a narcissist as well. She helped to define narcissistic abuse. Some friends either had a deep understanding or were willing to listen as well.

Jessica has learned not to make excuses for others and reminds herself to pay attention to what she knows is ok for herself. Jessica calls it her “fatal flaw” that she always tries to see the good in people, but doesn’t give herself enough credit for the good in herself. She tries hard to make others see the good in themselves rather than trusting her gut.

After the separation and finances were worked out, Jessica saw her ex on the same plane and had a trauma reaction to his presence. She did not feel safe in the same space and was shaking and sweating through the whole flight. She needed the support of her friends. Jessica pointed out the parallel responses between this kind of abuse and that of physical abuse in terms of fear and safety. Jessica became aware shortly after seeing her ex, that he had died unexpectedly. This provided some final closure and felt relieving in that sense.

14- Eleanor

Eleanor was pursuing a post-secondary degree and working when she met her partner. She was very involved in her church and had a good support community at the time. She

owned her condo near the beach and describes it as a great life. She intensely disliked her partner when they first met because she felt that he was arrogant and obnoxious, however, it seemed like a compliment when he started paying attention to her because he didn't seem to like anybody else. He also seemed to see things about her that were different or that she was insecure about and turned them into frequent compliments. He seemed melancholic and deep/intelligent. Eleanor stated that everything stayed amazing as long as his needs were met (he has since been diagnosed as narcissistic). Eleanor describes her former self as someone who was willing to self-sacrifice to the point of complete drainage for relationships.

Eleanor was raised in a Christian family and is part of that community. She states that there is not a language in that community for dealing with a marriage where one spouse lives with a personality disorder. She did not realize that forgiveness did not necessarily mean having to stay in relationships. Eleanor felt, and was told by people that she should fight for the relationship, pray harder, and have better boundaries to make it work. She stated that it hadn't occurred to her that she could walk away from the relationship. Eleanor stated that she values relationships very highly.

In hindsight, the red flags began even while dating. She also noticed that on their honeymoon, she was doing all of the work. He turned that around and told her that he was feeling the same way. She was embarrassed that she had missed something, but now realised that he was just flipping the narrative.

Eleanor stated that his rage/anger started when her daughter was born. Before that, everything had revolved around him and the unspoken rule was that it was her job to make him happy. She was no longer able to focus solely on him, and she also now had needs that were expressed. He would tell her that she was prioritizing her daughter over the relationship. She was to blame for not meeting his needs, but also for having needs of her own, therefore, why should he try to meet her needs. He then began to remove himself from the family unit (school, work & travel).

Eleanor describes the abuse like being a mouse in a cage where they keep changing the maze. And then that the partner indicates, "you're an idiot because you can't find the way out". Eleanor became aware that nothing she could do was ever good enough for her partner. When asked, her partner would give a backhanded compliment/critique instead and managed to turn it into a "character defect". Eleanor noticed that her partner would twist any situation in which she was angry/hurt by something he had done into making it her fault and her apologizing. Once when she called him out on it, he admitted that he was doing it intentionally and had done it to past girlfriends. He then managed to flip the situation so that it felt like a compliment (you are so smart/awesome to have figured it out), and so the issue was dropped. Eleanor noticed in hindsight that he seemed proud of himself, and not disturbed by what he had done. The intentionality of it only struck her deeply later (15 years). Eleanor found that one of the hardest things to grasp about her

situation was that his actions were intentionally designed to mess with her mind/mind games, to confuse, and to win.

Eleanor noticed that her partner, when confronted with her feelings or with an issue that she had with his behavior, would either mimic or reverse the sentiment. When she would say “I’m hurt”, he would likewise echo the sentiment back to her as if she had done this to him as well. Eleanor specifies that this is designed to diffuse blame and that her partner would use this when they went to therapy to reduce her credibility and his guilt. This makes it impossible to conduct a normal relationship or to problem solve because it presents ‘red herring’ information to sort through= an “attack to level the playing field”.

Eleanor describes that her partner would “train” her into never saying no to him by extracting a punishment when he was unhappy with her, mainly in the form of withdrawal from the relationship and negative behaviors (slamming cupboards etc...). She described that the hostility lingered always under the surface at all times. It would feel easier to say yes, no didn’t feel like an option.

When her partner was away for an extended time, he would call randomly and require her to be attentive to his needs no matter what she was doing at the time (including caring for their children) for as long as he wanted in the moment. Eleanor’s partner would take great care to remind her how difficult things were for him even when he was experiencing something amazing to ensure that she was being attentive to his needs. Her partner would become very upset at her if her attention was diverted to other things (such as being interrupted by their kids). One of these incidences was a red flag that Eleanor chose to deal with by researching what was happening and how to fix it. This was a turning point into greater awareness about what was happening.

Eleanor had a condo from before they married and he wanted her to sell it instead of working so hard while he was a student (so that she could focus more on the relationship). He called her “selfish” when she would not sell and indicated that he shouldn’t have to help around the house or with their daughter. It was her fault that she was tired, even though selling would have been a poor financial choice in the long-run. Towards the end, he would also run up the credit cards in an extravagant way on himself.

Eleanor and her partner moved a lot in service of his school and job and her great support system was eroded because of it. She has now redeveloped it in the aftermath of the divorce. Many friends had talked with her about setting boundaries, not realising that this was not possible in the same way as in a nonpathological relationship.

Eleanor and her partner attempted therapy with a world renown therapist and when he noticed Eleanor’s partner in a physically aggressive stance pointed this out. He also pointed out Eleanor’s submissive body language when she had told him that she was frightened and hurt by her partner. Her partner also echoed these sentiments, however,

the therapist pointed out that he appeared more angry than anything else. Her partner had an inability to process this since it did not fit with his own narrative.

Eleanor feels that INTs look for caretaking personalities who are willing to “suck it up” (put their own feelings aside for the sake of harmony/in favor of someone else’s/caring/giving/have a hard time saying “no”). Eleanor speculates that if she had more needs, that the relationship would not have continued as long as it did.

Part of the longevity of Eleanor’s relationship could be attributed to not fully understanding what narcissistic characteristics were and how they played out in the relationship. She persisted in trying to heal the relationship using research/books and therapy geared towards nonpathological marriages. “This doesn’t fit anything I know. This is not a dance [of partners].”

Eleanor would give her partner the benefit of the doubt when he would gaslight her. Her words were ultimately used against her and were a tool for her partner to get what he wanted out of the situation.

Living with an INT affects the “entire mood & tone” and “your ability to breathe”/clarity. Psychological abuse proved difficult to identify and for her and others to understand because you cannot say, “Oh look at this bruise. He hit me.” It is not as concrete as physical abuse. It is difficult to describe and there is little language for it because it cannot be interpreted through the lens of a “normal” relationship.

Eleanor described that covertly keeping her away from friends and family served to promote the longevity of the relationship and allowed him to get away with much more. He would tell her lies about them to create wedges. He would also “attack people behind the scenes” so that they would no longer want to come over for visits. She did not discover the truth of this until after separation. Eleanor thought that they were just too busy to come over instead of feeling scared to be there. It was also difficult to cut ties especially because of concerns for her children (custody, effect on them).

Eleanor stated that at some point in the relationship she began to have fleeting thoughts of self harm. She described being exhausted by the emotional pain. Eleanor realised that the purpose of these thoughts were prompted because if she was physically hurt and in the hospital, perhaps her partner would exhibit some empathy for her. However, she also realised that even then he would likely flip the narrative so that he was the victim somehow. Eleanor was also getting autoimmune and breathing issues, however, she noticed that when he went away, so did the issues.

After multiple marriage counsellors (because her partner kept saying they didn’t know what they were talking about), Eleanor gave an ultimatum that they would need to

successfully work through regular counselling sessions and have accountability every week for 6 months. He told her he would, but then left on a trip and didn't come home.

Eleanor had to battle in court around finances, and custody and states her partner lied continually throughout this period. He discredited her to many people. (The understanding of facing this probability also promoted longevity.)

Eleanor's partner would apologize and try to get her back even after the court proceedings and lies, however would tell others that apologizing was the only way to get her back (in service to his needs). However, Eleanor identified that she began to easily spot his manipulations and could see them for what they were.

Eleanor started to educate herself about emotional abuse and her therapist introduced the concept of the borderline narcissist through a book that he gave her. As well, she found a book that dealt with narcissism and the Christian community specifically. This helped to identify her caretaking nature/self-sacrifice and language for what she was dealing with. She expressed that there is power in having the language for what is happening.

Eleanor started to have a friend deal with her partner before the separation because she would then have a witness to his gaslighting. Her friend has gained a sense of understanding (as did others) and have been a strong support for her because of their understanding. Eleanor stated that she began to get clarity once her partner had moved out. CBT work and Gabor Mate (body/brain connection) helped her to understand the reality of her feelings around her relationship, which she did independently with research/training.

Eleanor was able to connect her body function issues to the mental stress of her relationship when she had more space to process events (he was away). She realised that the relationship did not have room for change, nor for success because of an inability for accountability on his part. She would always feel that she could do nothing right in the scope of the relationship. She realised that his actions served to keep her "confused, down, crushed & feeling worthless" so that she would not catch on to his behavior.

Eleanor stated that a sense of understanding about her partner's manipulation was developed thru learning about the "drama triangle" (INTs cannot relate through compassion, empathy, and understanding"). Roles= persecutor, victim, & rescuer. INTs always place themselves as the victim.

Eleanor has done research and talked with people who have gone through a similar experience and describes it as being a "club" in the sense of the commonalities, language, and an understanding of the effects on the self. Having the community support and having someone believe her was vital. "You get it."

Eleanor has learned that she needs to protect herself and to not allow herself to be drained in service of someone else's needs (rescuer role). She learned to trust herself and to be in touch with her instincts (allow them to guide her) and her feelings of hurt or anger. She allows herself to be angry about the relationship and that there is a good reason for that. Not all relationships need to be maintained at any cost. "Don't fight for a relationship that is not giving." She wishes that she had knowledge about trusting the self and about INTs before going into the relationship. Eleanor suggests that it is important that people learn when to walk away from a relationship and be given a language for why.

"The only way out is to lose the relationship" = very difficult for someone who values relationships

15- Cecilia

Cecilia was young when she began the relationship with her partner. She put her schooling on hold after meeting her partner. Cecilia's father had passed away 2 years prior to meeting her partner and she felt "ripped off" and angry. She also describes herself as having low self-esteem at the time. She found him attractive, charming, funny, and he gave her attention. They moved in together 10 months after meeting.

Cecilia felt that she and her partner were soulmates upon meeting him (which he would also say). She thinks that due to her adoption, she may have had some lingering feelings around abandonment and therefore, hung on to whatever relationships she could at all costs, even when toxic. Her mom encouraged this to some degree by telling her to "just ignore" his behavior. Her home model, however, was very loving and supportive.

Cecilia speculates that the façade her partner had at the beginning to "rope" her in was dropped because he became comfortable that he 'had' her once they moved in together. He no longer had to try or to win her over. They had a lot of fun together in the beginning, but Cecilia felt that he engaged in certain activities to enmesh her and eventually this changed once they moved in together. In hindsight Cecilia realises that the activities centered around her partner's wants/needs and that her needs were "put on the backburner".

Cecilia felt that her partner conditioned her to believe that her needs were not as important in the relationship as a result of the focus on him. He would not participate in things that she wanted to do and she would learn not to have expectations around holidays like mothers day, bdays, anniversaries etc... He would make excuses not to do the things that she wanted to do. He would indicate that her problems were a nuisance and that she shouldn't bother him with them (ex: her mom's serious health issues). She felt programmed that "this is my stuff and men don't need to hear it".

Cecilia identified that she began “brushing things under the carpet” right at the beginning of the relationship. She felt things were “off” but didn’t feel that she could do any better. She never felt that she could fully trust him. There were times when she thought he was lying to her but didn’t have proof.

Cecilia was able to uncover multiple affairs that her partner had engaged in by listening to her instincts and standing up for herself. He explained to her that he had a sex-addiction in justification and used other explanations, including denial. Cecilia felt like an object for his use sexually. She felt manipulated into performing sex acts that she did not wish to do, but engaged in to please him. When she resisted, he would become angry. Cecilia would end up apologizing for not giving in. Even after discovering her partner cheating and he left to spend time with the other woman, he still tried to convince her to stay in the relationship.

Cecilia’s partner would require certain things of her and then tell her that she was wrong for doing those things, including sexual acts. She stated that she “turned off her emotions, became blank”. She thought she was doing these things to save her marriage because of what he had told her. If Cecilia called him on his behavior, he would blame her or make her seem like the one at fault, or she would take on the responsibility for it. This would even happen sometimes when there was nothing within her control.

Cecilia felt like she could not be free, that she could not express her views or opinions, because if they didn’t match her partner’s, they didn’t count. “They were wrong.” Her self-esteem plummeted rapidly & deeply in the relationship. Cecilia feels that this abuse was difficult to identify and name and receives little validation from others. In one instance when her partner was being physically intimidating and threatening, she was ready to “take the hit” because it would be a concrete representation of the abuse and would get him out of the house. This would allow her to get help and support, and also feel deserving of validation.

Cecilia had a steady job and carried the bills for the family. Her partner could not keep a job because he had expectations of being the boss when he had no qualifications. They ended up with a huge debt load because of her partner’s spending, which greatly affected her credit. He would spend extravagantly on himself, while the rest of the family did not.

Her partner used things against her when talking with others to discredit her, including the sexual acts that he had required of her. For example, he told their son that she had cheated on him. Cecilia stated that she would cover for his behavior with other people (wanted him to look good), not realizing that others saw “right through him”, which she found out much later. She lost friends because she chose to support him.

Cecilia decided that she could no longer accept her partners behavior when she discovered evidence of his cheating on her. She became very careful about how she

uncovered things and actions that she took because she “knew what he was capable of”. She told him they were over if he did not go to counselling with her and if he didn’t end things with the other woman (he didn’t do either). He wouldn’t leave the house for 2 years, while still visiting his girlfriend, and things devolved to the point that police and victim services had to be involved. He would make threats and involve her son in them, including name calling to devalue her (fat, ugly, haggard, sallow, useless, no man will ever love you). She found out that he had said the same wooing things to other girlfriends that he had to her, as well as lying about her. Cecilia states that the hardest thing in acceptance and healing was the understanding that the marriage was not real → the feelings she had were not reciprocated.

Her partner made life very difficult for her and her son for a few years after separation because of her perceived rejection of him. She ended up needing a protection order because he was stalking and harassing her- messages screaming, threats.

Cecilia felt that him and others like him are very good at manipulation, which contributed to the longevity of the relationship. It became too much effort to stand up for herself because to do so was very exhausting.

Cecilia states that she was afraid of what her ex could do and of the unknown, which is part of the reason that she stayed for so long. She was worried that she might end up homeless and lose everything, including her son. She felt brainwashed that she had to stay with him because she couldn’t do things on her own, that she could keep safe if she did what he wanted. His behavior had become normalized. Cecilia feels that she lost herself in the relationship, that she was a shadow of herself. The relationship was highly detrimental to her health and mental health.

Cecilia perceives herself as a fighter and this helped her to stand up for herself in court against her ex. She proved to herself that she could do it and she wanted to show other women that they could win against a narcissist too. Specialised information about dealing with a narcissist in court was very helpful also. She discovered that if documents were worded to seem like he was winning, she was able to get the concessions that she needed. Contrary to what her ex had threatened, the court was fair in how it treated them and saw through his deceptions. She was able to access resources such as victim services and a conduct order. The prospect of him leaving the country also was helpful to get some space and distance.

Cecilia feels herself to be lucky in that he was an “asshole” so that others could see him for what he was (rather than charming as many INTs are), so that people around her had a sense of understanding about what she had been through.

Having proof of his cheating and his behavior during the relationship and separation via texts, emails, and witnesses was helpful in recovery. Cecilia credits her supportive

friendships to making it through the separation process. They helped to keep her grounded and focused, and they gave nonjudgmental support and strength. They helped her to keep fighting when it was needed (ex: court). She also has gotten involved with others who have gone through relationship with INTs, which has helped to recognize the patterns in behavior, a sense of understanding, and of not being alone. She feels that she may have gone back to her partner if not for this support.

Therapy helped to identify what made her vulnerable to her partner in the first place. Cecilia learned that she has some abandonment and self-esteem issues that she had to work through. She still worries that similar things may happen in her new relationship and that she isn't good enough. Meditation is also helping to work through these issues and her negative self-talk. She is aware that the trauma can stay with a person long-term and triggers will occur. She also did a lot of research around narcissistic abuse and traits which helped to understand what had happened. She feels that if she had the views, knowledge, and education that she has now, that she would have never married him.

Dating again and discovering that other men found her attractive helped in terms of self image. The validation allowed her to focus on the "bigger picture" and that she was worthy and valuable, not just an object. That what her partner said about her wasn't true. This helped to gather strength to go forward into divorce. Cecilia's new partner presents a contrast, which helps her to see what a healthy relationship looks like, but also to highlight the toxicity of her former one. She has a partner who is willing to be reciprocal and even today this will catch her off guard at times. When this has happened, the moments are incredibly meaningful to Cecilia and allows her to feel like she is a priority. Her current partner has also shown her that he cares about problems that she has and is willing to be there, listen, and to be empathetic.

Cecilia feels that she is learning that she is very intuitive and that she can listen to herself. She employs gratitude and is happy for the first time in her life. She wishes that she could have told her former self that she is ok, that she is worthy of love and is loved, that she was going to be fine, and that she needed to get herself back. She is willing to give herself grace and forgiveness for not choosing herself. She would like for people to be aware that although there may be challenges, there is the possibility of a healthy life after a relationship such as this.

16- Nancy

Nancy was still in high school when she began the relationship with her partner, and they moved in together between 6-9 months of dating. He seemed to have things together/more mature and gave her attention which she was not used to. They discussed marriage very early on in the relationship, but he didn't officially propose until their 10th year together. She states that they "jumped in" very quickly. Nancy describes her relationship in that when things were good, they were very good, when they were bad,

they were very bad. Nancy recognizes that there were some similarities from her parent's relationship and that some of her partner's negative behaviors felt familiar and seemed normal. Nancy and her partner would take trips that were spearheaded by her partner & would have "no expense spared".

Nancy's partner chose to take work that was out of town frequently, leaving her with the entire responsibility for running the household/large yard while working full time. Nancy felt that he should have made his relationship and family a much higher priority and participated more. Nancy grew to be very self-sufficient, however, she stated that she was never allowed to acknowledge how lonely she felt.

Nancy felt that she really started to see the red flags about 4-6 years into the relationship. Her instincts were really trying to come thru at that time and she started thinking about exit strategies. Nancy feels that her partner was able to manipulate the way that she thought, into giving him the benefit of the doubt and not challenging him. For this reason, there were no consequences for her partner's negative behaviors (such as her leaving him). He would bait her with the promises of events that she enjoyed, trips, marriage etc... There was always some big gesture that would keep her coming back into the relationship emotionally. In hindsight, Nancy realised that she always asked permission to do anything, even when he was not there.

Nancy knew not to bring up things that she was concerned about because she was always worried about "pissing him off". She stated that as a result, she was always "walking on eggshells" or else she would risk him making her suffer in some way. He would work away from home longer or he would "treat her like garbage" for a few days. She now feels that this was strategic- a "sick game" and that he would bait her with choosing to come home or not, like currency for the relationship, knowing that she was all alone at the house. She felt trained to "just get on with it", to not "rock the boat". He would eventually come home when he wanted to and love bomb= "shower, shower, love, love. It's party, presents and all the gifts come. I'll take you to all of these places and do all these things." .The cycle was akin to an intermittent reward system.

Nancy feels that she (in hindsight) had little control over what was going on in her life and that her partner used her capabilities to provide a convenient life for him (ex: not having to do the household chores). It was never acknowledged positively, but just expected that she would do everything. When Nancy would bring up concerns, her partner would bring up something that he may have stored away until just that moment in order to shift the focus/blame on to her. Everything was her fault. She would become animated and frustrated in response to this behavior. She could "see the circle that didn't exist physically." "Everything in me feels it, and I see it, but I don't [at the same time] and I can't prove it." This made her question herself and if what she was feeling was real. She felt that this was an internal fight that went on between her intuition and feelings generated from her partner and the relationship. Her partner would accuse her of

being a “ticking time bomb” even though he was the one everyone would tip toe around. Alcohol was a major factor in her partner’s negative behaviors and Nancy would have to caretake and worry about his safety, therefore suppressing her anger about it.

Nancy’s partner would tell her in many different ways that she was not good enough, that she was not worthy, that she was not contributing. He would also call her a ticking time bomb regularly and hearing that so much/over time made her wonder if there was truth to this.

Nancy believes that her partner would sense that she was pulling away and would strategically disappear for awhile, causing her to worry about his wellbeing or problems. This felt like a game or cycle to her of punishment-reward where he would withdraw and not participate when he was not getting what he wanted, or would come home and go out with her when he was. The small rewards along the way would make her feel like things were “back to normal”, however if she “rocked the boat” things would get cancelled. He would tell her to listen or that he was in charge.

Her partner was able to make a bigger income and would remind Nancy that she had not completed her post-secondary education so he was entitled to come and go as he pleased (unlike her). This made figuring out an exit plan very difficult because she didn’t feel she would be able to afford it. Debt was a factor in the justification as to why her partner worked so much, however, he was the one who would spend all the money on alcohol and toys. Her partner required her to go back to work after having her children and she began to work in his office, but without pay. It did not make sense for her to work full time when all of the money would go to childcare, however, her partner would regularly bring it up that she was not contributing financially “rubbing her nose in it”, even though this was a mutual decision and she was the primary parent. Nancy believes that this may actually have been purposeful. Her partner felt entitled to make all of the decisions because he was the breadwinner. This greatly affected her feelings of self-worth negatively and Nancy felt that she didn’t have a voice in the relationship. Nancy states that their life together was centered around her partner’s needs. She would always run activities past her partner and accede to his wishes or else she would have to do things alone. He would use guilt/justifications as a tool to have things his way.

Nancy would put anger/hurt aside in favor of protecting and caring for her partner, which she now realizes likely allowed him to feel that he could do whatever he wanted without consequence “I’ve got her”. Nancy stated that her partner likely knew that she would protect him and the relationship at all costs because she didn’t want it all to go away, so he felt freedom to behave in the way that he did. Nancy caught her partner cheating on her when she went to visit him while he was away. She realized that she was angry, but would question herself and ask herself what was wrong with her. She developed a sense of complacency to deal with it because if she said something, it would get turned around on her.

Nancy feels that the trauma from psychological abuse is akin to that of physical abuse. She felt that it creeps up on a person and that you don't necessarily recognize it for what it is in the moment.

Nancy and her partner had built a life together very quickly, getting a house, dog, trailer and other accoutrements. She feels that they didn't get married for a long time and kept gathering stuff to "keep her on the hook" in the relationship and to keep her looking forward to the promises, rather than what was going on in the moment. She realized that she had a fear of being rejected. Nancy wanted to fight for the relationship because they had been together for so long, that they had built so much, and "on paper" was a good life. Nancy felt her marriage vow was a very important thing. Financially she was not sure if she could manage and also did not have good options to live somewhere else. "There was no easy way out". When she would contemplate leaving, she would tell herself that she couldn't do things, "you're not good enough", "you need me" which would be an echo of her partner's words. However, she was actually taking care of all the things she was worried about anyway.

Things became "exponentially" worse in the relationship and they went to marriage counselling (Nancy had seriously thought of leaving, but didn't just yet). Her partner ended up stopping, but told her to go by herself. They had 2 children at this point and moved to a new area, where he chose again to do more work away from the home. In hindsight, Nancy always felt like a single parent. He eventually walked out by telling her he didn't like her or anything about their life anymore and by texting her that they were divorcing. She felt he just walked away and didn't look back (he didn't talk to his children for the next 6 mos). Nancy has noticed that he does the same cycle of withholding and language use with his daughter as well. She recognizes that he also puts the kids in the middle by talking negatively about her to them. She is agonized over this behavior, but feels powerless to stop it. Her way of resistance is to consistently teach them about boundaries.

Nancy has learned to listen and trust her intuition, to keep boundaries and she is teaching her kids to do likewise. She still has some old triggers/default, like worrying about messing things up by speaking up. Nancy has attended counselling. She realises that she is doing all that she needs to and all that she can for her and the kids.

It has been helpful for Nancy to label her partners behaviors from the relationship to gain a sense of understanding about why things felt off, such as him using time away from the home strategically as a punishment-reward system to achieve what he wanted from her. Nancy keeps sticky notes around her house to affirm her worth, capability, and to be present. Support from friends helped her to talk through feelings and perspectives on relationships. They have encouraged her to express her needs/wants, acted as cheerleaders, sometimes taking care of the kids and dinners. She describes them as helping to "keep her afloat". She feels that there are people who "have her back" and help

to reflect her worth to her. Nancy gains strength from knowing and fulfilling what her children want & need, that is what keeps her moving forward. She has become very intentional in her choices now. She is also taking steps to model a healthy relationship. Nancy feels a sense of community to know that others struggle with balancing everything as well. Time and space away from her partner has enabled her to think with more clarity and to be away from messages of unworthiness, although she states he is still relentless in his messaging to her. While Nancy still finds it difficult to talk about wants/needs in her new relationship, she has come to realise that it is ok to talk about expectations. He accepted and acknowledged what she had to say, in contrast to her former partner.

Nancy has earned to trust herself more and knows that she is capable and worthy of being happy. She is no longer afraid of being alone, of doing things on her own, and now recognizes that she had been all along the way.

17- Ruby

Ruby had a Master's degree and was a working full time professional in her field when she met her partner online. She had just gone through a divorce and was dealing with very difficult ongoing issues with her son. 9/11 had just occurred and she was feeling like her life was "out of control". She stated that she had a "desperate need to be heard and companioned." She did not have much of an outlet because of her profession and being unable to divulge much to people in the community. He was very charming and things were very good at first. He was insightful about people and "could determine their needs, what buttons to push, and what words to say". He showed a lot of interest in her life and it was a "good distraction". They married a year after first talking, even though Ruby states that he didn't know anything about her life at the time.

Ruby was very attracted to her partner partially because of a similar Christian based belief/practice. They were able to have faith-based conversations that she hadn't in past relationships, and perhaps kept the relationship going. Ruby stated that she believed in marriage and wanted to stay married. She always wanted to believe the best of people.

Ruby was dealing with a very traumatic occurrence with her son and had to cut her visit short with her partner. Her partner called to tell her that he had been arrested for having inappropriate sexual contact with one of the underage girls that he mentored. He claimed it was a misunderstanding but did detail some sexual activity. Ruby felt at the time that he was being honest, however, questions now if her was telling the truth. He ended up being classified as a sex offender and had jail time. She felt sorry for him because his church banned him, he was fired, and his kids were devastated, while feeling revulsion as well. He indicated to some degree that it was her fault because she had told him to find someone more locally. When Ruby was not around or unavailable, her partner would be looking around for other females (preferably single) to hang out with, and preferably ones who would rely on him. She felt he played the white knight who rescues broken

butterflies. Ruby's partner would often conduct himself inappropriately in terms of his mentoring and ministry, however, he would state that these actions were his special calling and that he was misunderstood "like Jesus" was.

Ruby's partner would show off his medals and would go everywhere in his specialized clothing that showcased his achievements. They would plan travel around events where he could show up as an athletics star/hero. Ruby described herself as a bit like a "groupie". It seemed to be all that he talked about. She and his kids got tired of it.

Ruby's partner would be petulant and use withdrawal if she did/said something that he didn't like. He wouldn't speak to her for days in these moments. However, he would still showcase for other people even during these times. Ruby decided to ignore the behaviors when she was unable to start conversations with him. He would stop when he needed something from her. She felt that she eventually just got used to this. Ruby purchased their home in another country, which enabled their ongoing purchases. She feels she has been too generous.

Her partner at first spent more time with her, but then he shifted to be out more after a few years, doing more mentoring projects. Ruby realizes now that he was looking for more women to "rescue". Ruby identified that this happened when she began to become more independent and was getting stronger. Activities and conversation centered around his interests, including what was supposed to be a co-facilitated bible study group. Ruby felt shut down because she could not get a word in edgewise and ended up deferring to him and his supposed greater knowledge.

Her partner had charmed everyone in her social circle. However, Ruby was experiencing rocky relationships with her family members because of her decision to move to another country. Only her mom knew about the sex offense, so people were very shocked and sad when they found out about the divorce. Because of this and a shared faith, her mom was the only person who she could share the full relationship events with. Ruby states that her partner often lied about what he was doing and who he was with. He had multiple emotional affairs and she also discovered that he had at least one physical affair.

Ruby found that her partner began to distance himself more from her and increasingly took on more "projects"- young women to mentor. She found that her partner was getting more short-tempered. He ended up blaming her for having to sell his horse ranch, even though she had no control over the operation. This projection of blame would be a frequent occurrence in the relationship. Ruby's partner told her that he was "releasing" her from the marriage because he knew how much she wanted to be with her mom and to live in her country, so it was a "favor" to her. He told her how it was breaking his heart. He also told her that he was having an affair with a woman 30-years younger who "accepts" him. It turned out she needed rescuing from an abusive ex. Ruby had suspected something but didn't know for sure until then. Ruby had to take responsibility for all the

logistics of the divorce, including selling the house and possessions and filing for proceedings. She was angry and just wanted to be done with him.

Aside from tending to believe the best in people, Ruby attributes the longevity to a strong belief in marriage and her ability to take things in stride.

Ruby states that it took a number of years to heal from her relationship. She has learned that she is a strong and resilient person. Also, that she had been too generous with money. Because she was so ashamed and demoralized by what happened in the relationship, she feels that she has become less trusting. She noticed that she was being judgemental about herself. Ruby focused/is focusing on building back her relationship with her son, mom, and sister. She reacquainted herself with friends. She walked, sang, prayed & took in nature (being present) to cope and heal. She joined an exercise class, looked for meaningful work, joined a choir, and volunteered. While her faith in Christianity was shaken by her experience, she found a church to join. She describes this as “putting on an armour”. Ruby got a meaningful tattoo as a healing reminder and that this experience does not define her.

Ruby believes that she has value and is worthwhile. She was bent but not broken. She believes that she was sucked into his version of a fantasy. She wonders if there was anything real about the relationship. She realises that it was not wrong to love deeply. She believes that this experience helped her to grow as a helper, to discover that she was a good administrator, and good at her profession.

18- Una

Una was working full-time in a professional helping field, had some long-standing health issues, and had recently broken up with someone when she met her partner. She was mostly recovered from the breakup but was still grieving what could have been. Her new partner was very charismatic, and he would compliment her highly in the beginning. She describes the beginning as “romantically intense”. He seemed so wonderful and interested in her.

Una classifies herself as a people pleaser, which she believes was reinforced “in a big way” by her partner and the relationship. Una believes herself to be conflict adverse and protective of her partner from having to experience anything negative. She stated that she had never been good about setting boundaries and requiring others to adhere to them. Self-esteem was dramatically eroded over the course of the relationship and Una states that it has taken awhile to rebuild.

Una’s partner would frequently comment that no one understood him, which would bring out the “savior complex” in her. She felt that she could be the support that no one else was giving and that she could get through to him.

Una persisted in trying to make the relationship work through multiple break ups, beyond viability. She has a hard time giving up on love. She held the belief that “love can conquer all”. She wanted to nurture/caretake the “hurt little boy” she saw in her partner and sees this helping side as a part of her identity. Una was in her 30s and wondered if she would find someone else.

Una stated that she noticed red flags within the first couple months of the relationship but put her instincts aside. One sign was an indicated lack of closeness with his family- her impression was that they must be somewhat cold and not supportive based on what her told her. However, she found the opposite to be true when she met them. He was the one who did not put effort into relationships. In hindsight, Una realizes that her partner would overvalue people at first and then cut them out completely. A few times he told her matter-of-factly that it would be easier for him if she were dead because then there would be no strings attached (not in a threatening way).

Una states that even in the beginning of the relationship, there was an element of push-pull (compliments + retreat). Una states that her partner would come home from work and immediately go to the bedroom. He would only come out when he was ready (his terms) to have a conversation. She states that it was lonely living with him. She felt that when he was around, he was thinking of her, but when they were apart, all thoughts of her were gone. Una stated that when her partner would withdraw, her anxiety would “go thru the roof”. She would be waiting and watching her phone for calls. Una states that much of her relationship was about waiting for her partner to be in a good mood, for him to want to be in contact, for him to move in etc... After withdrawal was over, there would be a huge feeling of relief for her.

Una often felt that he was just waiting for her to make a mistake, so she was always trying hard to “get it right”, otherwise he would give her a “hard time” about the perceived mistake. Una states that the relationship was characterized by a constant/pervasive sense of waiting for it to come to an end. This anxiety increased over time. He would often pull the rug out from under her by ending the relationship for no apparent reason and without warning, so at first this was surprising. Eventually this would seem somewhat normalized. Her partner would imply that she was to blame/at fault for difficulties in their relationship rather than taking any ownership.

Una’s partner would tell her that he was not interested in hearing about her past or trauma, he likened it to a PTSD symptom (to hear about past relationships), which meant that Una’s “whole world became about us”. Una would end up having to comfort him when she shared something that had been traumatic for her. Her partner only wanted to talk about things that were of interest to him and although he would call it debating, his comments to her were often “belittling” to her opinions if they were different from his. Everything was always on his terms. Una noticed a serious lack of understanding of

empathy and compassion for others. Una recounts a time when her friend's husband had a stroke, and his comment to her was, "Why are you upset? You're fine."

They had some common interests, but Una found that often their activities would focus on his interests which showed up when doing things like visiting her family. She stated that she would have to cut the trip short or apologise for going due to his lack of enthusiasm/withdrawal of affection/lack of support. Romantic gestures and fun activities stopped over time. Una stopped engaging with the things that made up the core of her identity in favor of protecting the relationship. This also eroded self confidence and her belief in herself as a resilient and strong person over time. Una stated that the extreme focus on the relationship created isolation from family and friends because she stopped remembering who she was outside of the relationship. Una did not want to color people's opinions of her partner negatively, so she did not share much about the relationship.

Una stated that she felt lonely for much of the relationship due to the withdrawal and rejection. She felt that she had to keep working hard to show him that the relationship was worth it. Una states that she has a fantastic support system who listen, but states that only one friend brought up that she thought the relationship was not healthy. Una states that she wishes that she had listened to her friend. However, she knows that everyone around her was glad when the relationship ended for good. Una had a colleague at work who heard about their 1st breakup at 6 months & told her to really listen to what he was telling her and not to put a spin on it. She felt her partner was showing his true colors at that point.

Una and her partner tried couples therapy together, however, he kept rejecting each therapist (even the one he chose) so it did not go anywhere. One pointed out that this was not ok but she chose to ignore that.

Small signs of positive change kept Una focused on continuing to work at the relationship. Una was very committed to making the relationship work and they would break up and make up because she would persist and then feel relief when they would come together again. Una states that she felt that she was validating her own worth through him. If he was ok, she was ok etc... Una describes being so entrenched into the relationship, that she had a hard time standing on her own during break up periods. Una feels the push-pull of the relationship contributed to the longevity and the short-term focus of always making sure things were ok in the moment promoted a narrow scope/frame of reference for looking at the relationship as a whole.

They had to move out of the place they were living in and her partner indicated that he would like to break up again. They tried to make things work a little longer, but her partner then suddenly said he was done. Una believes that the time living apart allowed her to feel more like herself again and that was not welcome by her partner, which likely contributed to the end.

Una noticed that twice when she went away on vacation, she felt more like herself to the point that other people noticed and commented about it. She didn't feel under scrutiny and pressure to get things right. This feeling also began while living apart. She began to get clarity that the relationship was not healthy and that there was the possibility of other things.

Una engaged in a process of self care after the break-up with things that had been neglected, such as walking, yoga, meditating. She began to feel grounded and at peace doing these activities. It helped to remind herself that the "aching chasm" would get better at some point. Una saw a therapist regularly and she states that this person "saved" her life because she saw her through it all, could give tough love, and put her back in touch with her strength. She observed to her that things are tough but that "it's not going to end you". Friends helped to remind her of who she was, the things that are interesting about her, and to do things with her. Family helped with logistics and constant support. After 6 mos. Una started dating again and the validation that she was actually an interesting person was helpful. Una stated that she was very intentional about this process in that she did not want to become more serious with anyone just yet.

Una notices a contrast with her new partner in things like visiting her family. Her partner just says "okay" when she proposes a visit which shows her the extent of the impact her previous partner had on her behavior. He also honors and respects her boundaries, and this is a very positive aspect of the relationship, rather than taking advantage of the ability to shift them.

Una realised that she could not get in touch again with her former partner or risk becoming ensnared again. She wrote letters about that and all the ways that she had been hurt and the damage done. Una was surprised at how easily she was willing to leave her identity behind for the sake of the relationship. She feels that she is much more resilient now and more cautious/conscious of red flags. Una has come to see her "big open heart" as a strength, rather than a weakness as it appeared to be in this relationship. Una feels that she has become better at setting and implementing boundaries. Una is learning to get the balance right between taking responsibility for things or being too willing to take things on.

19-Wendy

Wendy was young when she met her partner and was finishing her university degree and working at 2 part-time jobs. She describes this as a busy, turbulent time as she was trying to support some friends through difficult mental health issues and her mom's addiction issues. Wendy describes herself as quite stressed at the time. She was attracted to her partner's intelligence, memory, and knowledge in their mutual field, he was also very attractive, and she was "instantly drawn to him" (magnetic). It felt like "he was the person that she had been waiting to meet". Wendy became close with her partner's

family. Wendy describes her memories as very extreme from opposite ends of the spectrum, but overwhelmingly negative.

Spending time with him felt fun. However, going out with friends could result in heightened anxiety and stress, partially due to alcohol consumption. Activities together decreased over the course of the relationship, he wanted to spend more time at his house, and was not interested in doing romantic things.

Wendy did not realize that her partner had a girlfriend when they started getting close, which was “shocking” to discover. Once she found out, he refused to talk about it, but he broke up with his girlfriend a week later. Wendy noticed that a couple months into the relationship that her partner changed after their first confrontation. He had previously been very affectionate and open. She began to wonder then if he was a narcissist. It seemed to her that he appeared to feel like he knew all that he needed to know about her at that point. She felt that he had begun to pull away, which increased her anxiety. Wendy found out that he had a pattern of overlapping/cheating relationships.

Anxiety was pervasive/undercurrent throughout the relationship but lessened when he was around to a certain degree. Wendy states that this anxiety was unique to this relationship. Wendy felt the relationship was unstable and driven by the fear that she needed him too much, or that he would leave, as well as the inauspicious beginnings. This fear was prompted because he would often not communicate/ignore messages for an extended period and this was never resolved. He would shut down the conversation and threaten to leave when it came up. Wendy states that this was a typical reaction to any form of perceived criticism. She realized that he cared about her when she was there, but not while away from each other.

Elise noticed her partner only did or talked about things that he was interested in or had a stake in. For example, if she wanted him to do something with her, she felt she had to prove to him that it was worth his while. He would often flip conversations so that they became about him (including a discussion about her mom’s addiction). When confronted, he claimed that it was him just trying to relate to her. Activities became more centralised around what he wanted to do. Elise felt that in the relationship, she could not define what she liked because he was so passionate about things, that it overshadowed her preferences.

Friends who saw them together were aware of what was happening in the relationship, however, for those that were more at a distance, Claire painted it as a good situation. Sometimes Claire would reach out, but there was one friend who was a main support because she saw and understood everything, therefore Claire felt no need to defend him with her. Claire felt if she told her family, they wouldn’t fully understand what was going on. Claire felt validated by her one friend, which was the opposite feeling that she was getting from her partner. Elise felt some guilt for burdening her friend without making

changes to her relationship at the time. She felt that she focused her social life around her partner

Aside from a lack of self-worth, Claire feels the relationship lasted as long as it did because their lives were very intertwined (friends, school, work, interests). It felt like she would be losing her whole ecosystem if they broke up, which was daunting. She also kept telling herself that she thought things would change. Claire states that focusing on the more immediate moments in the relationship kept her from being able to see the “whole picture”. Things weren’t ever resolved, but it felt like having a short memory for events. (Because there were so many issues and they kept getting swept away.)

Claire felt impulses to break up since the first couple months of the relationship and finally she had said something that bothered him while on a trip and he wouldn’t speak to her for the whole day. She had an impulse to break up then and a few months later. Claire felt like she was finally listening to her instincts. She felt relief when she told him. He wouldn’t accept this, and Claire describes the end as very messy. She had wanted him to take some sense of responsibility, but he was able to absolve himself because she had met someone new. She states that he suddenly had a sense of understanding about what was bothering her but realizes that he probably knew all along and chose not to do anything about it. This was confirmed by mutual friends (unbeknownst to her until the end). He did the bare minimum until he felt he had to do more or lose her. He ended up confessing that he had past emotional and sexual traumas from relationships that resulted in some of his actions and Claire wondered if this confession was a manipulation (however, she realizes that they may have triggered each other and had differing coping strategies).

Claire is working on improving her sense of self so that she will never be in a similar situation. The important friend who had a sense of understanding of the situation was very honest and helpful. Since she viewed the friend as someone who had a high sense of worth, she was inspiring in terms of how someone should be treated. Claire met someone who presented a contrast to her partner, who listened and gave her confidence to break up with her partner. She notes that he can see through the illusions that people hold about themselves, which has been very helpful to her. She feels that she can be her whole self with him. Claire’s mom has been doing well in treatment so the energy she would normally use worrying about her can be used somewhere else. The pandemic has allowed Claire to take time to stop and reflect. She was able to come back to herself and to not feel so anxious. She occasionally had run into her ex and mutual friends which made moving on difficult and is now prevented through social restrictions. This gave her a feeling of safety and helped to heal. Claire had been seeing a therapist before the relationship and speculates that she might have purposefully stopped so as not to confront what was happening.

Claire still feels on the whole positively towards her partner despite all of the negative things that occurred and believes that this may be a result of a lingering sense of

imbalance in feelings of worth. Claire is feeling like she is regaining her sense of self and that she is back in touch with her own interests. She has rediscovered what she wants to do in a way that she describes as “authentic”.

Claire learned that she could be in denial about relationships, and this was a sad realization. She had felt that she could trust her instincts, but this time she chose to ignore them because she had a fear of being alone. She feels this relates directly to a lack of self-worth and that she had perceived her partner as better than her in some way. She intends to be more cautious/intentional going forward and to keep more distance and space in her relationships. She felt shaken that she had allowed the power imbalance in the relationship to occur the way that it did because she did not perceive herself as someone who would allow a person to treat her that way. She has also learned that she can take time to make decisions/breathe, to sit with feelings and if something is going to disappear before she is ready to decide, then it probably isn't worth it. Keeping a bit of a barrier/boundaries romantically and in friendships is healthy (she states that she could previously with professional relationships in her life). She states that she couldn't even see the boundaries necessary at times.

20- Brooke

Brooke was a working professional with a post-secondary education when she met her partner at the same company (different location). Brooke had recently broken up from a long term, live-in relationship and was unsure of where her life was going at the time. Brooke was taking some time to focus on herself. Brooke found that he paid a lot of attention to the things that mattered most to her in the beginning. He listened deeply to her and she felt that he was “on her side”. She states that he was so good at this, “it was almost like he took notes”. He knew just what to touch on that was meaningful to her and that made her feel good and special in a way she hadn't in a long time.

He started off as a friend who was supporting her through her breakup. He was married and his wife had recently given birth to multiples, however, he would confess to Brooke that his marriage was not doing well. He was very smart, attractive, exciting, and they had a “mental connection”. He expressed that he wanted a partner in a mature way and was not afraid to express emotions. He would describe how he wanted to love just the one woman that he was with, unlike his Dad.

Eventually the relationship became something more and he would tell her that he was in the process of leaving his wife and that he couldn't wait for her to be a stepmom for his kids. He told her that he had been telling his family about her and that his mom was “excited for him to be with somebody who was the right person for him” (lying). Initially, he made her feel that she was the perfect person for him and that none of the negative stuff mattered.

Brooke sees herself as an intelligent person, however, felt that her partner had the ability to take all of that away to be in control. In the relationship, she felt that she wasn't smart, that she was lazy, and not good enough because of what he would tell her and how he would treat her. Towards the end of the relationship, Brooke felt that she was a shell of who she was. He stripped everything away/beat it down over time.

Brooke states that she began to see red flags a couple months into the relationship. She felt that he capitalized on the fact that she was not in a good place (re: her recent breakup) and felt it was the best time to make a move. He started to manipulate things at the workplace so that she was excluded from certain events by telling her that they shouldn't be seen together. Brooke stated that her partner came off as amazing/brilliant at work, kind, sweet, and caring. Everyone adored him. He had a persona where he was a guy's guy, had the best of the best, and women loved him. Brooke fully believes that he could have turned everyone against her and successfully painted himself as a victim if their affair was to have come out.

Brooke noticed very early on that there was a heavy aspect of control to the relationship. For example, he would require her to take his call no matter what time of day/night, and when she missed a call (often due to time change difference), he would berate her for being lazy and not loving him. This would be alternated by telling her how amazing she was and making future promises.

Brooke states that everything would have to be perfect and the way that he thought it should be or he would criticize or become judgmental. Once Brooke started to feel a little of her control coming back, her partner would threaten to tell their boss and that she would be the one fired because he was the one with the wife. He would make it seem like she was the one being inappropriate.

He often covertly/overtly indicated to Brooke that she should be appreciative for all that he was doing for her because he was risking his marriage/being caught. It was expected that Brooke would pay for their time together and any extra toys that he might require (because he couldn't risk his wife seeing expenses). This included flights to come and see her, restaurants, and various "gifts". If she refused, he would threaten to tell their boss about the affair, and that she needed to prove her love.

When her partner came to stay at her home, he spent a lot of time criticizing her home in a variety of ways. She stated that everyday it was like being beaten down emotionally. Over time, it becomes difficult to see what was happening because it was so exhausting. It was impossible to "have a moment to breathe, to get to a point of being "whole". When her partner sensed her taking space, he would strike = cyclical relationship: "They make you feel good about everything in your life until they start to break you down." She felt worthless. Brooke's partner would promise all kinds of things to keep her enmeshed in the relationship, from the idea that his marriage was over, to going on trips together and

doing fun things that never materialized in the end. Brooke was mainly drawn in by the promise that they would be fully together. She was even willing to give up her own dreams of bio children to be a stepparent to his. She was willing to risk things in her life because he made it seem that the relationship was meant to be.

Her partner started off by wooing her with meaningful gestures, but gradually stopped doing things for her, using the excuse that he couldn't do these things because his wife might notice. Brooke stated that they always had to go to remote spots and not hold hands even when travelling because of his marriage. This eventually helped her to realise that he had no intentions of leaving his wife, that his marriage wasn't actually over. Brooke states that sex was the focus of the relationship. She describes their sexual time together as amazing with an incredible connection. The risqué nature of the affair added to the excitement.

Brooke states that she was “losing a ridiculous amount of weight” and crying every day of the relationship. Brooke's partner began to feel threatened by her weight loss and told her she didn't look good and to put weight on (because he had been gaining).

Towards the end especially, Brooke states that nothing she ever did felt good enough. She felt that he would criticize her everyday just to keep her under his thumb. This created a major detrimental effect on self-esteem. She describes this as having everything “completely stripped away”. She no longer felt attractive, smart, that she could get her “shit” together= rock bottom. She felt at that point that she would have died for him. She no longer knew who she was because she was constantly second-guessing herself due to his ongoing critiques- “never full checklist” of things that she had to do, be, or say. It left her feeling unworthy/lazy. Brooke states that the relationship made her feel like she was crazy. Like everything was her fault/doing. That it was so toxic that it changed her perception of herself and the world at the time.

Brooke states that she often felt sideswiped. “You never know What's going to hit and the mood and the time.” (like living in a war zone)= unpredictable. No real rhyme or reason. When he felt out of control, it was always someone else's fault. He could take no accountability for the negative, but always for the positive (part of that is about making the people around him feel lesser than). It was “like he's robbing from people so he can feel better about himself”, but it's only temporary and like an addict requires another, bigger hit (this allows him to feel in control).

Brooke justified his behavior to herself & to friends, partially because she felt so stuck. Support was somewhat limited because there were few people that Brooke could share all of the details with due to embarrassment. Brooke would call these friends for support when she experienced upset from her partner. Friends warned her away, however, she needed the understanding that she had to see certain things through. Brooke told her mother and sister. Her mom was worried, but her sister was not supportive of her. Not

only could Brooke not share what was happening with her whole circle, but eventually her partner would also make digs about her friends. She realized that he did not like her to go out with them and would call her late at night if she was out to ask why she wasn't home.

Brooke is now aware that her partner treated his wife the same way and she is certain that his behavior continued with others after they broke up. She had gotten to know his wife and saw how he would criticize her/put her down as well, how she was never good enough, but then would flip it and tell her how they were going to make things right. She also saw this behavior with their female customers. Brooke has observed that he seems to be playing a long-game. That he was willing to put time in to get power and control. She is certain that he was grooming a different work contact even before they broke up to be in a relationship with him (he saw the opportunity because this person had just left her husband).

In hindsight, having some distance from the relationship and through talking with others, Brooke realizes that what felt unpredictable was actually very predictable and common in terms of the psychological abuse that a narcissist uses.

Brooke feels that the reason for the length of the relationship was because her partner was so good at what he did (manipulation) and that he had so much power over her. There was excitement and intimacy generated from the relationship, but then Brooke was taken over by fear of what could happen if she displeased her partner. Brooke states that she needed to get stronger so that she could be in a place to fully end it.

When Brooke realized that she was a shell of who she was a year later, she knew it was time to get out. As well, there was an incident where her partner claimed that he had received a letter from someone threatening to tell everyone about their relationship. Brooke believes that this was a strategy to pull her back in because he was feeling her distancing herself from the relationship. He told her he thought it was time to end it, resulting in her "groveling" to keep the relationship. Eventually she became "strong" enough to actually end it. Brooke states that he became "psycho" and asked how could she do this when he was going to leave his family for her. She was scared to share anything about her life for fear that he would use it against her. He threatened to tell everyone they worked with about the affair. He found out about her new partner, looked up his contact information and threatened to tell him as well. He would call her partner's workplace and hang up when her new partner would answer. He would also call her late at night when she was with her new partner, to the point that she had to turn off her ringer. Brooke states that for years afterwards, her heart would skip, and she would lose breath when she noticed someone calling from his area. Aside from fearing negative exposure, Brooke told her friends that if anything was to happen to her, that he would be the first person to suspect.

Brooke has chosen not to tell her husband or anyone else about her ex because she feels that he “has taken up enough space” in her life. No contact with him was important to break away, which helped for clarity. There was still longing, however, she realizes that having a conversation with him would not end well for her, no matter how much time and distance away. She did a lot of talking and had personal support, but friends did not enable the relationship. Brooke has seen the opposite with someone she knows dealing with a similar relationship and feels that enabling does not help. Journalling has helped, and she began to regain her strength by looking inside to what was important to her. Her energy shifted towards meeting new people and dating which Brooke describes as healthy and good (committing to this new thing rather than him). It allowed her to see that there were other people out there for her who were healthier for her and to expand her horizons. Brooke met someone who was to become her new husband shortly after ending things with her ex. (presented a contrast). It might not have been enough time for herself but was good on the whole. Brooke then felt strong enough to be willing to risk her ex telling their boss and felt that she was in a better place ethically and morally. The risk of losing her job and being on her own felt more appealing than the relationship. She felt that there was nothing left to crush, but that she could build back if necessary. Brooke has been able to provide help and advice to others in similar situations because of her experience with her partner. She feels that it prompted her to reflect about herself and to become more understanding, compassionate, and empathetic.

Brooke states that she felt hurt and disgusted by herself; that she was in a relationship with this person when she knew it was wrong. However, she feels that she has learned what is important to her in a relationship and that she could appreciate her husband more because of that. She appreciates things that are beyond the façade that someone can put on. She knows what is important to her and will no longer settle for less. She is back in touch with her feelings of being intelligent, strong, and resilient. She describes herself as totally different in a good way. She states that she no longer needs validation from others to feel good about herself and she is happy. She is more intentional/mindful about how she wants to spend her time.

Brooke feels that there is a need for support for people who go through a relationship such as this, so that they can be seen and heard. Mainly because often when people hear about what is happening, they don't understand the depth of the damage or why someone continues to stay. It is hard for people to recognize the manipulation, even when they are in it. That they aren't crazy and to put trust in their ability that they can make it on their own.

She would tell people that if it looks too good to be true, it probably is. That if someone wants to be with you, they will do what is necessary to do so (such as divorcing before getting into a relationship) (“will do the right thing”). That no one is worth waiting for. It is important that significant others understand that INT behavior is not about them. It is about power and control. Brooke feels that the legal system should recognize the damage

that an INT parent can do to children (psychological abuse) and is thankful that she did not end up with a child as a product of the relationship to tie her to it. This abuse is difficult to identify because there are few concrete behaviors to point to. She feels it is important for people to trust their instincts in relationships and not put those inner feelings aside, but to examine them, even if it takes time. It's never worth it to put those feelings aside.

21- Diana

Diana was young when she met her partner and working at a professional career in her field. She was enjoying her 20s and going out a lot. She was dating someone who was emotionally abusive to her when she met her partner at their workplace, and she did not like him at first. Her new partner invited her to a show that he was promoting and made a move even though they both had partners at the time. Once she had broken up with her boyfriend, he pursued her heavily, but then would pull away as soon as she showed interest. He would do very nice caring things and then go silent for days.

During the relationship, Diana believed that this was the love that she deserved so she put aside her instincts. She stated that she thinks she really didn't know what love is supposed to be. She believed it was about fighting for it no matter what and always sticking by the person.

Diana saw a major red flag before they even started dating. He gaslit her by telling her that she was not depressed when she was, and persisted in trying to have sex with her after she said no. She broke down and cried, then he got mad at her for making noise since his parents were sleeping. He then yelled at her sister over the phone when she called her for a ride.

He told her he loved her very early on, however, when she noted it, he said, "Don't get high on yourself, I love everybody". In hindsight, she believes that what he was really saying is that he would not be monogamous with her. Negative behavior got worse as the relationship progressed and she believes he became more overt to see what he could get away with.

Diana states that her partner tried to talk her into using her savings to buy them a place to live 2-3 years into the relationship, but that her father intervened to prevent it. Although they had similar jobs, her partner would consistently have no money because he would spend on extravagant things for himself. He stole money from both Diana and from people under him (when he would do promotions by keeping money that he was supposed to distribute). Diana would pay for most of their activities together as a result. Diana states that she spent a lot of money and lost a lot of savings during that relationship.

Diana states that her relationship was characterised by her partner coercing her to do sexual activities with young women and other men that she did not want to do. If she would cry about it, he would get mad at her and ignore her, continue to have sex, and cuddle with the other women. Diana states that this created a lot of trauma that she is still working through. Her partner gradually introduced the concept of threesomes over time and eventually 'allowed' 2 women to sleep in their tent while they were on a camping trip. He tried to start something the first night, but when she got upset, ignored her and cuddled with the other women. The next morning, Diana packed to leave but states that her partner manipulated her into staying, telling her that they would break up permanently if she left. The next night Diana states that he forced her to do all of the things she hadn't wanted to the first night and that was how the sexual coercion began. She stated that things like that happened almost every weekend after that.

Diana's partner would use his anger and withdrawal of affection as a tool to get her to do what he wanted. She noticed that her partner would have people around him who would be willing to lie and cover for him. (People who she felt were likewise being manipulated.) She stated that she got very good at denial and believed that he wouldn't do these negative things to her, however, she trusted other people less. She found her self-worth/self-esteem plummeting. Diana began to try to always look her best, dressing up and working out "all the time" so that she would look the way he wanted her to. She realises in hindsight that appearance had nothing to do with what was happening.

Diana states that her partner was cheating on her, but his friends would not tell her the truth about it. She would confront him about her suspicions, but he would flip it around and tell her it wasn't true. She would believe him because she felt she was in denial. After the relationship was over, multiple women came forward to let her know that her partner had cheated on her with them.

Diana didn't share what was going on with friends and family, however her family was there when she needed them throughout, but friends were not. Diana stated that she started isolating herself from family and friends. She felt that they knew something was going on and didn't like her partner, but she would defend/protect him and end up in fights with her family due to her denial. Her partner did not like her family would also fight with them. Diana feels that this was probably strategic to isolate her further. Diana feels that this isolation served to lower her feelings of self-worth even more.

Diana noticed that there were a number of events where her partner showed a distinct lack of empathy to her. For example, she was very upset when she had to put her dog down, but he pushed her to go out and then when she was crying and wanted to go home, he told her to "get over it it's just a dog". He told her they were then going to an after-hours club and that she was a downer and ruining everyone's night. She felt so wrapped up in what her partner wanted that she noticed her own behavior changed for the worse towards others. She felt that if she didn't do what her partner wanted, there would be

“bad repercussions”. Punishment could look like really long silent treatment, from weeks to a month. If confronted, he would tell her that she was making things up, or that other people who told her something couldn’t be trusted. He would sometimes get very upset, especially if she was crying, and tell her to shut up. On one occasion, he pinned her against the wall by her throat. After large disturbances, her partner would try to woo her back. He would “pull me back in” by apologizing and doing grand romantic gestures.

Diana states that she had been conditioned not to trust her instincts by her partner, to ignore, and to not follow thru with them. She feels that he was very good at manipulation and brainwashing her, including having her think that she didn’t like to be around her family anymore.

Diana states that things became “very dark” in the final year and there were many silent treatments. Diana realised that he had been grooming another younger woman to take her place and deliberately became close to her. Diana states that this woman did not know that she and her partner were together at first, however, it turned out that this woman and her partner had been sleeping together the whole time. She felt that her partner was flaunting this in front of her and then he told her that he needed space to work on himself; that he was going off the grid. It turned out that he had been talking with other people during that time, just not her. She asked him to meet up because she was going through a hard time and that is when he broke up with her because she was “too needy”. She saw him again secretly, but her sister found out and confronted her, which was the ultimate end. He continued to reach out for a couple years after and had his friends approach her as well. Diana ignored these attempts and blocked him. Diana attributes her ability to stay away to the other women admitting to her about the cheating. Diana states that the reason the other woman likely told her is because he had started cheating on that woman as well.

To help recover Diana did a full moon burning ritual. She burned all of the things he gave her and smashed something from the other woman. She wished she had access to a rage room to smash things. Even after they broke up, she missed him and spent time grieving. Certain books were recommended to her by a psychic and one in particular helped her a great deal for the next 2 years. She states that she went through an “anger” phase for a month and her family welcomed that because she had not shown signs of that during her other breakups with him. Her parents stated after that they felt she had come back to herself. Diana’s current partner presents a contrast to her INT partner. She describes it as a really good relationship and the healthiest one she has been in.

Diana feels that she is still “broken”, but that she is getting stronger and that reaching out for help has been part of that recovery. She has realised that she can’t keep putting on a “front” so that everyone thinks she is ok when she is not. She states that she now speaks up for herself. She feels sad for the manipulated person that she was.

Diana learned that she is very strong to have dealt with all of that and not to have broken down. After she left for the final time, she was able to pull herself out quickly. She learned that she had been easy to manipulate and she had been somewhat broken, however, she now believes that she deserves more than that and that she can and should trust her instincts. She will never put up with something like that again and will listen to any red flags that she sees.

22- Rita

Rita and her partner got engaged after 9 months of dating and married after a year. She had recently moved to a much larger city before dating him and was under a “ton” of professional stress. Rita was devastated by watching her beloved dog going through a slow and painful palliative process at the end of their life. However, things were going well in other aspects of life. Her partner seemed like “everything I had ever wanted”, outdoorsy, but responsible, playful, fun, adventurous, passionate, and knowledgeable about world news, which allowed for “fabulous” conversation. His friends were also intellectually curious and interesting people. Rita was warned about his family and eventually found out that her partner would not protect her from their abuse. Rita felt that she was “damaged goods” going into the relationship because of her abusive family and childhood. In hindsight, paying attention to her partner’s lack of empathy may have alerted her to the emotional danger. “Can they appreciate your point of view even if they disagree with it?” Rita states that her partner presented as a “helper” and would always rush to offer assistance but would either not follow through or would leave someone else to do the work (often her).

Rita noticed that her partner stopped doing many of his adventurous activities, that he became increasingly resentful, and blamed her for his inaction because she had become too busy to do them as well. When Rita would try to have a conversation about something her partner had a role in, he would never apologize and would “go off the handle”. The conversation would become about what she had done wrong instead of addressing the issue that Rita opened the discussion to deal with. Rita felt that she didn’t have the language to express to him what she was feeling when he would do this and called it “victim stole”. “You just victim stole!”. He would refocus himself into the victim role of the relationship, no matter the situation, instead of apologizing or taking ownership of his role. This would mean that Rita would be forced into a caretaking role for her partner’s emotions. Rita’s partner would actively lie to her to get what he wanted, including on their honeymoon, but it was hard to know what to do because he wouldn’t own up to any of it.

Rita stated that as soon as her partner heard an edge in her voice he would “roar” and “rant” and generally have a tantrum, yelling at her for screaming at him, that she didn’t properly understand things, and that things always had to be her way. Rita states that she is heartbroken that she had to go through that and she feels horrified that someone she

loved would treat her that way. Rita never found a successful way to bring up difficult subjects that would not result in a negative reaction or positive change. Rita's partner admitted to having "overwhelming" rage at her at the end of the relationship. Any conversation about making needed changes or things that she would like to see happen became about her inadequacies. He would critique her over her appearance, but not allow her to spend money to fix issues (ex: teeth).

Rita's partner would covertly criticize her for doing even the smallest of things "wrong" in the household, and act like he had prevented her from making a grave error when he would point it out. Ex: degree of angle that she opened the fridge door, how she used a washcloth, or cleaned her car window. He would give reasons to support his superior knowledge in an area that would justify his "way" of doing things.

Rita began to figure out that he would set her up at times to cover up for him when he had been lying or not doing the things that he should have. She would often apologize to others for his lack of consideration. When she would take the brunt of the result, he would deny knowledge of the problem, nor would he apologize and would act incredulous that she would want one. She felt that it was a sense of, "My husband just held my neck underwater while someone else drowned me."

Rita states that at times he would escape from getting into trouble or being challenged by being funny and charming, telling stories. He would part ways from anyone who held him accountable and Rita felt that she ended up playing that role. She felt that this also put her in the role of the "complainer" (the one who pointed out inconsistencies), just so that appropriate life and relationship items would get accomplished. She would also have to fix difficulties he created. She felt that her values were constantly in conflict because her partner would do actions that were contrary to her values in social situations, and she would be the one who would have to clean up the fallout, even though enabling was against her value system. Rita describes the worst part of this as the confusion that she was left with. She states that in these moments, she would feel shamed and humiliated.

Rita's friend observed that she was the only person in her partner's life who held him accountable and that he hated her for it. Rita was living in a different location from her personal friends and the ones nearby were mutual to her and her partner. Rita states that they were loathe to get in the middle of a "bickering" couple. Aside from a couple of friends, most people could not understand what she was going through, they didn't "get" it. Giving examples without knowledge of the full context of what was happening in the relationship "would sound weird." Rita states that their relationship issues took a toll on her friendships.

Rita felt that her partner told others' stories that would make her seem like the outrageous one in the partnership. She states that none of his friends have talked to her since their breakup and believes they had been hearing untrue things about her character. She felt

like she was the one left taking responsibility for her partner's negative social behavior because he was so outwardly likeable.

Rita felt that her sense of her own instincts were "destroyed" by the relationship. "What was up, was down." Rita knew events were wrong, but didn't know what to do about that, because when she would voice them, she was continually challenged by both her partner and his family. It was an accumulation of small things that formed a much bigger picture of something much more problematic, which was very difficult to see at the time. Rita believes that learning to pay attention to your gut is extremely important to avoid this kind of relationship.

Couples therapy proved to be ineffective and Rita states that a couple of them told her she was controlling, when in fact she saw herself as a "doormat". She stated that her partner would use examples of behaviors out of context to paint a picture of her that was less than flattering, especially when it was a straw-that-broke-the-camel's-back event, and she would have a reaction. Counselling strengthened his belief system in that he sought to have reinforced the ideas that he has "done nothing wrong" and "it's not my fault".

Rita found that her irritability increased over time in the relationship. There was frustration because her partner would talk a good game, but often not follow through with action. This inaction would be met with denial of the conversation in the first place, trying to convince her their conversation was about something else, and expressing incredulity that she would be so upset because she was in the wrong.

Rita stated that she began to doubt her own perceptions, that she felt it "broke" her. She no longer felt entitled to her own reactions. She felt she had taken on the role of the angry, frustrated, overwhelmed, confused, complainer. She felt that she was getting smaller and shut down.

Rita had considered calling off the wedding, but didn't feel that anything was quite bad enough to do so, and had felt confused at the time about the relationship. She stated that it was, "the most confusing experience of my life." Rita felt that if the relationship didn't work out, that she would be losing everything. She felt that breaking up would leave her a "single, divorced, miserable, messed up, lonely, bitter woman in my forties" while he being younger and handsome, could just carry on with someone else. The last line of their wedding vows was, "I promise to grow old be your side, or die trying." (The latter part was unsaid). Rita states that she feels that she did die trying. That who she was then was killed by her partner and the relationship. She states that she no longer believes that a romantic partner will "have my back". She feels sad for that person that she was and feels that she was naïve. She had believed that the relationship was workable when it was not. Rita states that she was "completely shattered and destroyed", "like a disco ball that has been hit by a crowbar". She states that she was confused about her boundaries and communication, not realizing that she was entitled to have a reaction.

The relationship fell apart, but Rita had to take care of everything in terms of paperwork, payments etc... He became very cold/indifferent. Her partner put up roadblocks along the way, but Rita was able to finalize things with the help of her lawyer who recognized her partner's personality issues and was able to "fight for me". She felt this was the only person next to herself willing to hold him accountable. Rita had to "chase" her partner for all of the expenses that he ultimately owed. Being in a new area, she did not have much support. Years after the divorce was complete, Rita discovered that her ex had made a modification to the divorce decree. She describes this like a "chill ran through my spine" worried about what he had done, however, it turned out that he had just requested a copy, likely to get remarried. Until she found that out, she describes it as a "cold, clammy fear".

Rita referred to many upheavals and time-based projects that kept her from focusing on the difficulties in her marriage or the idea of leaving it. She also felt that she had not established for herself what was bottom-line behaviors in a relationship. She did not have a backup plan available to leave her partner, including finances or a place to stay. Rita didn't realize at the time but talking and trying to rationalize with her partner never went anywhere because her partner didn't have to experience negative behavioral consequences for his actions. Her partner would talk her in circles to his own ends and she describes this like "playing tennis with Serena Williams"- meaning losing badly. It was all a tactic to him.

Eventually through research Rita recognized that her partner was the fragile/vulnerable subtype of narcissist: deficits in impulse control and emotional ability, hypersensitivity to criticism, pathological inability to complete a task, and projected blame. Reading about gaslighting was an epiphany because she finally had an understanding of why she had been doubting her perceptions of what had happened in the relationship. She stated that seeing this, she "just about vomited". Her lawyer also identified narcissism. Rita needed a space to talk about relationship problems that were entirely different from her friends' relationship issues. She began to regularly engage in therapy, which helped her to put herself back together again. Rita states that antidepressants helped to deal with anxiety, depression, and insomnia. She had 2 friends that she could confide in and who provided perspective and support. Some would fly out to visit on weekends. Rita bought a paddleboard and began to get involved with that community. She describes having space from her partner like "water in the desert". Joie de vivre came back and she began to like herself again. She regained her humor, creativity, connection, safety, and sense of challenge. She says the more distance she got from her partner, the better she felt. Moving was a turning point in releasing bad memories from her marriage. Rita adopted a dog which allowed her to love again and have someone, which also gave her more distance from the relationship.

Rita felt that she learned humility in her relationship and had some disappointment about how she reacted to certain situations. She felt that she had lost her self-respect and feels it would have gone differently if she had been from a healthier background. Rita can easily

identify when similar experiences are occurring for others in her work because of this experience. She has also learned that one should always have a backup plan to avoid isolation with a partner. As well, that it is always ok to say “This feels bad. You need to stop.” And that no one will prevent her from saying it ever again. Rita has learned how her background contributes to relationships and feels that she can now manage that aspect, “owning myself”. She feels that she was in a “perfect storm” but having survived it, is a better and wiser person. Her self-respect has returned and she genuinely likes herself. She feels happy and whole now and is “the captain of my own ship”. She may make mistakes, but she pays attention, works hard not to repeat them, and apologizes for them. She still struggles with conflict, but she is proud of herself and has done things that she formerly thought were impossible. She is grateful to have this experience behind her.

23- Morgan

Morgan was quite young when she began her relationship with her partner and was in the process of completing an undergraduate degree. Morgan was under a great deal of stress financially, working 3-4 jobs, and dealing with serious health concerns. She believes her family played a part in her acceptance of her partner. He was persistent in his attentions towards her until she agreed to date him, even though her initial instincts were not positive. Months after dating, she found out that he was also dating her friend but managed to convince her that there was nothing going on and that they were misreading the situation. Her mother also promoted the relationship, so she pushed away her instincts. He paid her a lot of attention and would often buy elaborate gifts. He involved extended families in their relationship early on. Morgan describes herself as assertive in the beginning, but this began to change when he would have persistent dramatic emotional reactions requiring her care, wearing away her boundaries. Asking people for help is very difficult for her. She would over-achieve and caretake to compensate for low self-worth. She feels that she was scared to lose love. She felt dizzy and tired for much of the relationship so didn't follow up of many of her instincts. He would give her tons of work to do to keep her busy, but then call her lazy.

Morgan grew up with traditional values around dating/marriage and believes that she may have seen the red-flags of the situation sooner had her mother not been controlling and involved in encouraging the relationship. Morgan did not see relationships modelled in a healthy way growing up, while everyone was “pretending everything was fine”. She believes that both of her parents are narcissistic, and her father was cheating on her mother, while her mother was emotionally and physically abusive to her. Her partner painted images of a beautiful future for them with marriage and a happy family, in contrast to her own unhealthy family (“carrot & bait situation”). She felt that he picked up on that vulnerability and used it to his advantage.

Morgan recognized in the first year of dating that her partner was pushy and would control who she talked to by following her around and throwing a “fit” or creating an

incident/emotional havoc so that she could not go out (at one point even throwing up and requiring her to care for him instead of going to meet someone to study). However, she already felt very attached to him. He would be gloomy and draining and act like he was doing her a big favor when they went out.

Morgan realized years later that one of the ways her partner had used to control her was through faking an extreme allergy to a medicine, which turned out to be a lie. She realized that all the “urgent tasks” that he required were specifically timed and fake. These included financial manipulations. He would use the things that her parents said to her to get what he wanted or devalue her. Morgan feels this was all about “breaking” her down like the “boiling frog theory”.

Morgan once found a dress in her partner’s closet, among other cheating evidence, but gave her partner the benefit of the doubt until the breakup, at which point she was able to put all the pieces together. He would deny everything, and it got to the point where she thinks he would actually plant evidence for her to find- gameplaying. Although her partner cheated on her with multiple people, he lied and told their social circle that she had been cheating on him. Morgan’s partner would lie to her and then when she would catch him, he would come up with a plausible excuse for his actions. He would often use partial truths. This was a pattern in all of his relationships.

Morgan’s partner would persistently hint that he wanted expensive things that he could not afford and would often not pitch in for common bills, citing his sadness over the loss of his father or saying he didn’t have the resources. After the breakup, his extended family confirmed that he used them the same way. He could not keep a job because of his attitude.

Morgan wanted to please and would do her partners homework and connect him in with her network. She feels she was overcompensating due to her family. Morgan stated that her partner began to get busier and to do things away from their relationship as time went on. In one instance, he broke up with her immediately after initiating sex for the first time (but not going through with it), which was extremely traumatizing for her. She began to see that many of his actions were about him “checking off a box”, that he was not genuine.

Morgan’s partner would critique/demean her for basic needs (such as needing to go to the washroom) if it did not fit his schedule at the time and the narrative would become that she was problematic. He would tell her that she cried all the time so that she no longer would cry in front of him. Morgan states that her life became about her partner. He would put in no effort, and she would put in “1000% effort to sustain it”. She was feeling very drained.

If Morgan would challenge her partner in a way he didn’t like, he would become this stone-cold” person, often would walk out on her, and would act like she was the one who

had hurt him. She realizes that he would act like this to make a point and so that it became extremely difficult for her to assert her boundaries. She recognizes that part of her may not have wanted to see who her partner really was because then she might have had to take action. This would have been difficult due to feeling dizzy and drained much of the time.

In the last year of the relationship, Morgan's partner walked out on her twice and she began to see a counsellor. He began ghosting her and she believes he was figuring out how far he could push her boundaries around that and cheating. This would cause her stress levels to increase greatly; she was not sleeping or eating, causing health issues.

Morgan states that she was slowly starting to recognize what was happening in her relationship and it was an "eye opener". She was able to begin detaching herself from the relationship so that she could walk out. Morgan feels he was using her in case his PR status didn't work out. She also states that his actions/entitlement became much more overt as the relationship went on. She could see that he was intensely selfish and began to see that it was a façade (his actions weren't genuine). Morgan finally started packing when she realized that he had been playing games and had a pattern of leaving for increasing time periods. She, her friends, and her counsellor could recognize it by then, so she decided that she was not going back. Morgan felt like such a burden that she had suicidal ideation. She had images of doing something that would mean she would just burn up so that people would have to deal with her body (and make an issue of it).

Her partner still manipulates people they know in common and family through discrediting her. He still does things like records a message on a mutual acquaintance's voicemail, knowing she would hear it. Morgan felt that the relationship "stalled" her growth

Morgan states that she has a large network of people who care for her and watch out for her. Her partner's extended family also helped her to detach. Therapy, research, and reading has helped her to distance herself and work through her trauma responses. Education around narcissism helped. Morgan told her story of breaking up to many people- talking helped, as well as recognizing her partner's abusive patterns with her and others. Morgan has gradually blocked connections to him so that she does not have to see/hear updates or photos. Morgan has also gotten rid of a number of toxic people in her life. Morgan is practicing self-kindness and giving herself space to process trauma and for what is helpful, including people. This includes setting realistic goals/expectations and not being too hard on herself (understanding that some things take time). She is surround herself with people and resources who are positive for her. Morgan could also compare her experience of her childhood to what had been happening in her relationship and did not want her children to go through what she had experienced, which helped to leave. Developing a reliable schedule and to-do list for herself was important because everything had been thrown out of whack.

Morgan still questions herself and asks herself if she is “crazy, did this really happen?”. She believes this to be the effect of gaslighting and that it had a deep impact on her trust in her own perceptions. She still battles this regularly. She feels that she has not fully healed from her trauma and still has trauma responses. However, now she feels that she is strong and has a lot more value than the people around her had given to her. Morgan can take away positive things from her experience, including learning to live in the moment. The ability to cut out toxic people in her life is something new and she has been willing to do that even when others disapprove. She has learned not to care about what others think when it is something good for her. She realizes that there is an abundance of love around her, and she is not scared to lose people who are not good fits in her life. She feels some sense of hopelessness because she has “nothing to draw on from the past” but realizes that she has wisdom and that this is her second chance. She now understands that she is not “too sensitive”, that it is not a “wrong thing”. She will no longer accept that a person can do whatever they want in a marriage. She respects herself and believes that she matters just as much as anybody, which she tells herself everyday. She believes that she is deserving of love, and she doesn’t need to work so hard for it to keep it, that her existence is enough.

24- Elise

Elise was doing well in life but had not had “much luck” in her romantic relationships when she met her partner. She had finished her MBA and was working. She had just broken up with a long-term partner. Elise was set up to date her partner by his uncle, and he appeared to be a nice, stable person with a good family background. They knew many people in common. They ended up in a committed relationship very quickly. Elise stated that she was someone who had difficulty picking up on negative things in relationships but believe that there was something that she was doing that was the problem. She felt her self-esteem was shaky. She would suppress her own instincts in favor of making everything comfortable for others. Elise stated that her partner would promise a lot of future activities, which helped to draw her in. Her partner seemed to have so much in common with her in the beginning and everything that she liked, he seemed to like as well. This changed later in the relationship, particularly after the engagement when he would get angry at her for suggesting activities. She would empathize based on his past history.

Elise noticed red flags on their first date. He bad-mouthed his aunt unfairly, and later he would make fun of her cooking. The first time that she slept over, he became enraged because she stole the covers all night while asleep. He also would tell her that his parents were terrible people, even though she found them to be lovely. A therapist recommended that she not marry her partner after discussing the sexual aspects of the relationship (that her partner would refuse to talk about). Early on, a friend of theirs observed to Elise that her partner’s humor seemed to be all about making fun of her and then later her sister

observed the same thing. Elise noticed a similar pattern of rage over insignificant or uncontrollable issues throughout the relationship.

The engagement was the point at which he dropped his façade in treatment of her. He stopped going to their club and wanted her not to go. She held on to it because she knew it was something healthy in her life. Elise realized the community that the club offered was important for her, she made friends there and it was a place that she felt was hers. She sensed that there was something off about him wanting her to get rid of the membership. Elise's partner would begin to make fun of her parents and it drove a wedge.

Elise's partner would use humor (jokes and comments) to mask put downs/criticism at her expense, targeting her character and competency, sometimes in front of others. Elise states that she began to have panic attacks as a result of this behavior- she began "doubting her every move". It was unpredictable/random. However, she gave him the benefit of the doubt because she perceived him as stable. She also began to work harder to be better. He would tell her that her reactions were "crazy" when she would bring up issues (ex: porn) and that she was making a big deal out of things. Elise found it exhausting to argue with her partner because she would never win, so she would just work harder or begin to hide herself when he would be disapproving of something.

Elise worked full time and took care of their son without help. She would give him the benefit of the doubt and at one point believed that depression might be the cause of the imbalance. Elise had so much to do that she only had time to focus on her son and work/house. Her partner would lie and devalue her opinions of what needed to change ("roadblocks"). This resulted in her questioning herself and wondering if she was the crazy one. She states that she doubted her sense of reality and judgement. Whenever Elise would bring up problems in the relationship that she would like to work on, her partner would twist the situation to make it seem that it was always her fault.

Elise became aware that he would treat her better when other people were around, so for many years, she would keep people coming to the house a lot, which helped to distract her from the problems. Elise felt that her partner portrayed a pretty normal, nice image, so she did not have much support (specific to what she was dealing with). She noticed her partner would lie about himself and change himself for who ever was in front of him, such as lying about enjoying an activity that someone else enjoyed. She noticed he would make promises to her and others but not follow through or reciprocate. She realized that he was into "image management" and thus incapable of true intimacy. She feels that he fakes relationships (hers and friendships) because he wanted to present a certain image, but that they are all superficial.

Elise had attributed their relationship issues to him being better than her and right. Raising her son coupled with her undiagnosed ADHD kept her distracted as well. She felt

that she went through phases of behavior in the relationship, from pleasing him, to trying manipulation, to avoidant, to very, very angry. She became focused on how to change her partner and was counting down the years until her son was 18 so she could leave. Worry about finances kept her in the relationship much longer. When her partner would critique something, she would take that on as instructions for being better at something, rather than just information. She did not rely on her instincts and set boundaries based on this.

Elise discovered that her partner was quite “sexually repressed”, but she gave him the benefit of the doubt that he was shy. Elise describes that it was never an intimate experience and that he would never initiate. However, she discovered that he accessed porn a great deal and felt there was a dichotomy there. She feels that it was about control and objectification.

Elise would protect her partner by helping to create the appearance of a normal family.

Counsellors did not recognize that her partner was narcissistic, and she felt blamed for the problems in the relationship. Her partner was treated like he was a victim. This continued until they saw a psychiatrist who labelled the narcissism.

Elise noticed that there was a pattern in the way her partner treated people and her response to him. She felt this confirmed he used abusive behavior and that he was the common denominator. She describes this as her being his “emotional clearinghouse”. If he felt badly about something, it became all about her and her shortcomings. She noticed that his relationships would start off great and then would begin to sour as people found out more about him or he became dissatisfied when his value was not recognized in the way he desired.

Elise feels that she stayed in the relationship because of the confusion around what was actually happening. Her partner would deny or challenge her perceptions at every turn and it was hard for her to “hold on to the fact that he damaged me. That was is a “damaging individual”. Undiagnosed ADHD, having a child, and a strong moral code complicated the possibility of leaving because she spent a lot of time reviewing her role in things before casting blame.

Elise asked her partner for a divorce. He threatened her financial stability at that point and also tried to leverage that she would be “ripping” her son’s world apart. She realised that her partner will always look after himself first, and that he does not self-reflect.

AL-Anon helped to deal with her reactivity so that she wouldn’t lash back and have her behavior become the focus. Elise began to write down events in her marriage so that she could process and get clarity on her feelings around what was happening. She began to identify the patterns of his behavior. A psychiatrist was the first one to label her partner’s behavior as narcissistic, so that she was able to do some research around the idea and

discovered that he fit more into the victim role (vulnerable). This allowed her to be able to figure out what role she played, and he played in their difficulties. Her psychiatrist helped her to build scaffolding to leave. Understanding that it was not about her, not her fault was very important. Elise learned about observing but not absorbing, avoiding emotional responses (Grey Rock Technique). She stated that it was the only time her partner got physical with her because it bothered him so much. She called him out on it and it did not happen again. She felt that this technique gave her power back but was very depleting to sustain. Elise focused on rebuilding/prioritizing social connections and going to her club regularly as a way to begin to place her marriage as a secondary relationship. A number of people began to ask her why she didn't leave her marriage if she was unhappy, which helped her to conceptualize that. Elise also had some support from neighbors who were pastors and they helped to advise her on what is important in a marriage, which she realized she was not getting no matter what she tried. Mentally separating in stages helped by taking planned steps towards leaving. Hiring a lawyer helped Elise from feeling turned around on what the facts were and what she wanted: "I would get turned around when I would talk to him. Everything would just get messed up when I would talk to him". She felt that she had extra "firepower" this way. Elise developed a relationship that she found supportive and was safely able to establish boundaries. Elise took time to examine her instincts and made sure the steps she was taking to leave were safe along the way. She has been taking stock and paying attention to her positive qualities, honoring them, but also not giving too much of herself. Getting distance from her partner and the relationship allowed her to see more clearly. It allowed her to differentiate when she feels comfortable with a situation, or not. She determines this by noticing if she feels like she has to be different from who she is. Empathy/pity helps Elise to see her partner as someone who is a base person rather than a bad person by understanding narcissistic motivations and behaviors (missing pieces). The alternative would be to hold anger, which does not feel good for her.

Elise has learned that she is intact, whole and perfect as she is. That she doesn't have to change or to be better when someone else says something that she feels badly about. Instead, she chooses to speak up and challenge it. She feels that there is still a delay in listening to her instincts and some self doubt. She now realizes that when she starts to disassociate, that something is wrong with a situation. She will no longer accept bad behavior at her expense. She has learned that everyone has flaws and that they don't make her terrible. Also, that it is not her job to fix all of them for others. She has decided to "populate her life with people who make [her] feel good about [herself]". She has realized that she does not have to stay in relationships that don't feel good. She wants to live with emotional safety by honoring and protecting her feelings first. She feels that clues to this type of dysfunctional relationship are someone who does a lot on their own, does too much in the relationship (perfectionist), and may appear strident about their partner. "Someone who is protractedly miserable, and nothing seems to get resolved." Their partner may appear "too nice socially" or like such a great person.

25- Tara

Tara was very young when she began her relationship with her partner, who was number of years older. Tara describes her partner as playful/fun, interesting, and charming. He was highly socially adept and people were drawn to him. She admired him and his accomplishments. They moved relatively quickly into getting married and starting a family. Tara describes that her mother was a narcissist who demanded high levels of attention through real or imagined illnesses, so she was primed for her relationship. “Being somebody else’s whipping boy” She would take responsibility for others’ emotions. Tara stated that she was a developing personality when she met her partner and that her self esteem wasn’t great.

Tara described that her partner worked long hours and that there wasn’t much socializing together. Tara felt alone in the relationship. Many people did not get or see what Tara was experiencing, so she did not have much support in dealing with the difficulties of her relationship. In fact, in some circumstances, people told her to “smarten up”. Tara did find acknowledgement through Gamblers Anonymous because there were people experiencing similar issues with their partner. Tara felt that she didn’t have much help in the household and that it was all on her shoulders while her husband would “make an appearance” much later in the day.

Tara reports seeing problems when her daughter was 1.5 years old. They were moving and her partner had bankrupted them. He left her to deal with the aftermath of that while he set up in a new place. She found out that he had borrowed a large sum of money from an acquaintance, so she realize that nothing would be different and had second thoughts about moving with him.

Tara noticed that her partner would have a public and private persona that were very different. At home he would indicate that she was never good enough and explain to her why she didn’t know enough or stack up, however, in public would brag about her. She noticed that he would not show compassion towards their son and that there was a complete disconnect between the way that others perceived her partner and what she saw behind closed doors. He also mentioned that he does not get emotionally connected to patients so as a result, he could work longer hours. She was aware that he had extremely poor boundaries and that he would revel in getting attention while downplaying that need at the same time. He would ask Tara for details about a person so that he could appear as though he cared about them. Tara classifies the emotional abuse of the relationship as “insidious”- subtle comments balanced by purchasing nice gifts that others would admire and tell her how lucky she was. She feels this would allow him to feel like he could get away with his negative behavior.

The covert nature of the abuse and the difficulty in explaining the full context to people created a state of confusion for Tara, as well as a difficulty in addressing it or being

understood. She realized later that it represented that she wasn't wired in the way that her husband was and that the confusion had been positive in a sense because she didn't think that way (as much as that made it difficult to "catch on").

The relationship revolved around her partner and she realized that he liked to be front and center and always talked about himself. Later, her kids pointed out that he would complain that nobody calls him, but yet he would not call either.

Tara described that in the beginning, money was scarce, but if she needed more for the household or kids, she was told she needed to budget better, that she was spending too much, and then he would become very annoyed by the request. Tara took that upon herself and felt that she had to "do better". When Tara would bring up a problem that she wanted to work to change, her partner would dismiss her concerns with annoyance. Tara's partner would make the decisions and would spend time to convince her that hers were incorrect. He would encourage this belief often in a covert way. Tara's partner would often tell her that she was, "too sensitive" "too anxious", "too serious", that it was her who had the problem, or that he "didn't say that/you didn't hear it right", that he "was only joking", "that's not what he meant", "you don't know what you are talking about", or he had forgotten all about it. He would credit others with being so much more interesting and bright in comparison. It was in hindsight that she realised just how much he had undermined her, creating a lack of sense of self worth and confidence. At one point he told her that she had borderline personality disorder, which her psychiatrist disputed completely. The manipulation and devaluation was a contrast to the good times, which added to Tara's confusion about the relationship.

Tara's accomplishments (ex: throwing a party) were often credited to her partner because he was a more overt personality. Her partner would not only fail to disabuse people of these notions, but would actively behave in a way to minimize her social contributions. This included stepping in front of her to engage with people and talking over her. He was aware of her social anxiety and would "abandon" her at parties or not check in with her in ways that she noticed other couples doing. He would promote the idea that he had special relationships with people and that she did not.

Because Tara looked up to her partner, she acceded to his decision making and the idea that his decisions were the correct ones. Tara felt that she was her partner's shadow- not really interesting to others, in contrast to her partner. She felt that she would disappear and that she couldn't compete with who her partner was, that he always had an interesting story to bring up. Tara felt that she became entrenched in the relationship and lost who she was.

She believed that because everyone liked him and thought he was incredible, so there must have been something wrong with her for struggling in the relationship. Also, that she was perceiving things incorrectly or not measuring up. She wasn't able to develop a

sense of self worth and confidence in the relationship because of subtle messaging from her partner along the way. Tara reported feeling like she was the “insane” one in the partnership for feeling the way that she did. Even with therapists, Tara would defend her partner by telling them that he was a “really nice guy” when they would suggest alternative points of view.

Tara’s partner had a gambling addiction. She noticed that this addiction also came with a belief of “specialness”, being above the law and natural order of things, even though evidence suggested otherwise.

Couple counselling was often ineffective because Tara came to understand that her partner’s addiction and behaviors were not about her, nor the dance of 2 parties. Tara likens this to a ballroom dance class where the instructor pointed out that Tara was taking care of him and his steps and that he wasn’t communicating his moves to her.

Tara recognized part way into her relationship that she needed to get an education and to learn to support herself, partly in response to her partner’s gambling addiction. She states that she is forever grateful that she had that awareness. At some point in the relationship, Tara decided to get her own chequing account, in a time where that was not typical. Her partner was quite upset by that. Tara also decided to go back to school and that coupled with meeting new people was validating to her. With increased independence, when Tara’s partner would abandon her at parties, she would sometimes take the car and drive herself home. In her GA group, Tara was considered somewhat of a rebel for becoming independent in the way that she was and for moving towards leaving her husband. Once Tara began her education program, she was able to apply some of what she had learned to reflect that certain things weren’t her fault or responsibility in the marriage.

Because people perceived Tara’s partner to be something different from what she saw in the home, she stayed longer. She stated that she would get feedback regularly about how wonderful he was. Tara’s main concern about leaving was around finances and having 5 kids to support without training/education to be in the workforce. As well, when she considered divorce at one point, one of her children got so upset by the idea that she decided to stay after all. She did leave 4-5 years before the end, even though he was acting like he wanted to return. She found out that during that time, he was having an affair while trying to get her to return. Tara began to take on some feelings of being a rebel in response to reflections from others in her GA group. Gaining her independence from her husband in terms of education, finances, and outside points of view were crucial to leaving. Tara began to get herself back when she made decisions like moving for 3 years and being around people who didn’t know her husband/marriage.

Her husband began to have an affair with a former patient who he had hired at their office, which had the effect of gradually pushing her out. She felt that this woman was

providing the worship and adoration that he craved and that Tara was no longer tolerated by him. He had lied to the woman about the true state of their relationship.

Tara saw an ad in the paper about a new degree program and thought that she could do it. She had to drop out a number of times because her partner had spent all of the money and she couldn't afford tuition. She eventually became financially able to support self and was coming in touch with outside points of view that validated her own. Tara reported feeling humiliated many times by having returned cheques and not having enough money to cover expenses, so she decided to get her own account as a safety net but did worry about the repercussions with her partner. She was seeing the difference from her relationships to other couples. They did couples therapy at one point and the psychiatrist helped her to start along the path of receiving outside help with an inkling that she might not be perceiving things incorrectly. Her partner's own psychiatrist had mentioned that doing analysis with him would be like "banging my head against the wall" which also helped to validate her perspective. It was pointed out to her that she learned to take responsibility for others' wellbeing/emotions from childhood. Tara mentioned one couple who had let her know that they no longer wanted to hang out together because they could not stand the way her partner treated her. That helped her to realize that her perceptions weren't crazy. Other friends helped her through at the end, but she noticed that they would get exhausted at times. The people along the way who generally really understood had also experienced something similar. Getting distance from the relationship helped Tara to begin to recover who she was. She also began to get a clearer picture of her partner and narcissism once she was out of the relationship. Tara states that her children were what kept her from acting on suicidal thoughts when her relationship ended. She had lost many of the supports that she had- dance community, profession, home, and community there. Tara's dogs helped her to get out of the house and talk to people; they were a nonjudgmental presence. Tara stated that being a part of a divorce group with people experiencing separation was a great help.

Tara states that she now trusts her perception of what is happening more, however, she still occasionally checks against other people's perception of things, because she had internalized her partner's messaging during the relationship. She now is in touch with her own resiliency and realizes that the ability to fight for herself never went fully away. She states that she feels "calmer", that life is calmer, and she is no longer addicted to chaos, which took an adjustment. She views herself as competent and that no matter what goes on, she will figure things out. She is more content and comfortable with the idea that while she may not be the "life of the party, that she can make solid connections with people that are meaningful, and that she genuinely cares for them. She now validates herself and realizes that it is ok to be a thinker and to be quieter. She no longer forces herself to do things she doesn't want or to be someone who she is not. She feels that she has learned to rely on herself and not to be eager to jump into relationships. In hindsight she would have slowed down and done more for herself, including getting her education earlier.

26- Mona

Mona was young when she met her partner, had just completed her university degree, and moved back home. She was in a transition time and was doing interim work while she looked for work in her field. She had just broken up with a different partner. The new relationship moved rapidly, and they moved in together quickly after they started seeing each other. Mona describes her partner as different from anyone else that she had been with, from a different country, with a stable job and old-fashioned values. He seemed kind, generous, and was highly attentive at first. He seemed like he would be there for her unconditionally. Mona grew up on social assistance and when younger, dated high risk partners. Mona described herself as someone who was always concerned about people's view of her and was a shy, socially anxious kid. While Mona allowed her partner to choose the tone of the relationship (and she had also done so in the past), she describes this was not common to other areas of her life. For instance, in her high stress job, she is very decisive. In her personal life, she describes herself as a "pushover". Often her friendships were one-sided.

Mona describes her partner as being very open with how much he cared about her very quickly in the relationship, and she took that to mean that if he loved and cared about her so much that he would not leave her or "screw me around". He told her that he loved her in the first week of their relationship, which she did question at the time. She realized later that he was either lying or didn't really know what that meant. Because her partner travelled a lot for work, Mona would be on her own a lot and his return would become romanticized- they would have the "whole song & dance".

Mona states that although there were red flags in the beginning, he also hid many of them well at first. His attentiveness began to take on a different flavour over time and it evolved gradually into controlling and overbearing behavior in a way that she did not notice happening. Looking back, Mona realizes that she never respected her partner, and that while she was in her 20s, it wasn't such a big deal, but years down the road and after having kids, it felt much different. Mona characterizes the main theme of the relationship as "drama". She states that she didn't fully recognize that in the beginning because in her 20s, she was surrounded by people who had drama going on in their lives. Mona states that this would cause chaos in their lives. Part of how her partner would create drama is to tell Mona untrue things about his background, such as lying about suicide attempts. She would get the sense at the time that he was lying but didn't not want to call him out on something so serious. She states that her partner is a compulsive liar who would lie even with the evidence right in front of him and that he was doing so right at the beginning of the relationship.

Mona states that she was exhausted by dealing with the drama that her partner created and the lying- it felt like mental gymnastics all of the time, that she was "beating [her]

head against a wall". She felt that she could not "call his bluff" on the off chance that she was wrong, meaning that she would be the "jerk".

5 years before the end of the relationship, when she became pregnant, her partner began to have affairs. Her focus had shifted more towards her children, and he was not get the kind of admiration/attention that he needed. She stated that she could not be bothered to "roll out the red carpet" anymore.

Mona felt that she was never fully able to do enough so that her partner was satisfied. Her partner always wanted grand gestures and gifts, but they were never grand enough or big enough. She felt it was impossible and never-ending trying to boost his ego. She felt that there was nothing that she could do, "so why bother trying". She stated that he was always angry at her or crying (manipulation).

Mona took care of all of the running of the household and raising the children. She states that her partner helped with nothing and even admitted that he felt no connection to the children. Even after separation, her partner only has the children a couple times a week and he wants her to be there during that time for family time.

Mona's partner engaged in multiple affairs that she was aware of, but beyond that (in her view), had inappropriate relationships with women. He would always have other women hovering around, but he would minimize it and tell her that "No, no, these girls are crazy." At one point, she found out that he had told an affair partner about some traumatic things that had happened to her as a child. Her partner also lied and told his affair partner that Mona had been sleeping around.

The activities of the relationship centered around what her partner liked to do. Mona states that she stopped her outdoorsy activities and they began to travel to "flashy" places instead and watch TV more because he liked to. This was very different from what she had grown up with. Mona states that she had done similar things in previous relationships, so it was not all just his influence. Mona felt that her partner had a romanticised view of relationships that required the same behaviors that you have when in the honeymoon phase (ex: spending all your time together to the exclusion of other things), and she felt that this created a sense of co-dependency. When Mona wanted to move on to a more independent phase of the relationship, she felt her partner would create fights that were always about something else as a red herring.

Mona has observed that not all narcissists are charming, that the hallmark seems to be that the delta between the highs and lows is erratic/extreme (rollercoaster of emotion). She feels that they derive something from that.

In the beginning, Mona would push back against the elements of control that her partner introduced but got worn down by fighting over things that weren't the real issue. Over

time, she stated that it had the effect of making her so exhausted that she would lie or just apologize and “take it on the chin”, because she didn’t feel like there was any point to having a discussion that went nowhere, even when she had a valid argument.

When Mona discovered messages on her partner’s phone indicating an affair, lies about her, and betrayal of her confidential information, she called him on it. The result was a major “blow-up, chaos, drama show”, however, her partner would lie and tell her it was done when it actually went on for a year beyond that.

Because Mona and her partner had moved to a new location, she didn’t have much local support and her old friends back home were happy that she was dating someone who appeared stable. She states however, that her family did “see right through him” and approached her in a non judgmental way, which was helpful, however, even though they were worried, she feels that in her 20s, there was nothing that anyone could have said to change her mind. Mona realized at some point in the relationship that she hated who she was within the confines of the dynamic. She wasn’t sure if those things were there before or new to the relationship. She felt herself to be “pathetic” that she stayed with her partner, even after the affairs and him telling an affair partner about her deeply personal childhood trauma, as well as him admitting to feeling no connection to their children. She believes that it was this feeling about herself that prompted the end of the relationship. She said to her partner, “I cannot be in this relationship with you and not hate myself.” Mona felt that in her 20s she got “carried away” with the relationship. When Mona found out about the affair & betrayal of her personal information, she stayed partly because her daughter was so young (6 weeks). As well, she states that she has always hated to be viewed as the “bad” person & did not want her partner’s family to think of her that way.

Mona states that she had been thinking about leaving her marriage for many years, since the affair. She decided to “prime” her husband by letting him know that she was unhappy. His behavior became more erratic and then finally he made a very bad parenting judgement call that she felt was unforgivable. She felt there was nothing left, that her heart had been broken too many times and there was no coming back. She asked a family member to come and wait in a car in the driveway because she knew he would react badly and chase the car. She stated that he “gets off on it” and likes the big dramatic show. He tells her that he expects them to come together again and she thinks he expects a big romantic reunion. She feels he is disconnected from reality because of these types of fantasies. He still texts her every morning and evening. She realizes that it is unfathomable to him that she does not want to be with him anymore. She feels this is exhausting and worries that it is hard on her kids. He will not listen when she asks him not to do things like that. She placates him because she does not want to fight. She says she tip toes around to keep his reactivity at bay. He will either cry, yell, or slam doors. On one occasion, he sat in front of the door so she could not get out of the room. He tells her that the only reason he has not moved back to his home country is her (not the kids).

Mona states that having children and recognizing her career achievements began to change around the concern that she used to have about what people thought about her. Her priorities became different and she no longer felt shame about the things that she used to, certain things no longer felt like a big deal. Mona is worried about getting into another relationship and replicating what happened in terms of giving so much to the partner without reciprocity/balance. Mona states that she still feels exhausted and that she is doing “nothing”. She feels she is sabotaging herself and that she isn’t eating or sleeping well. Aside from her job dealing with vaccines in a COVID world, it has been a “rough year”. Mona does not yet feel pride about leaving and thinks that it will take some time to forgive herself and feel growth. She still does not know how to feel about her own reactions in the relationship because she felt that she knew early on that he was a narcissist but stayed anyway. She states that she would have rather been the “ignorant one who just happened to find themselves in that situation.” She is still beating herself up (emotionally) over that.

She feels that she might have paid more attention to her partner’s behavior if friends or family had called her out about her partner’s lying, reminded her to trust her instincts, and to also think about what that would look like 10 years down the road. She tries to forgive herself for staying in the relationship as long as she did. Mona has learned that although many of her friendships have been one-sided, that it worked for her too because then she didn’t have to put “stuff” out there. She feels that now that she is older, she doesn’t want to live like that.

27- Dorian

Dorian had been working in a professional career for a number of years, after taking some post-secondary courses and was feeling at his best, both physically and mentally. He had just gotten out of a long-term relationship and stated that he “jumped very quickly” into a relationship with his partner. The relationship progressed rapidly, which felt out of character for him, but it “felt right”. His partner had told him stories about being kicked out from living with her family and he felt awful for her and upset at her family. Dorian characterizes himself as a helper, a former “pushover”, and it is the reason that he chose the job that he does. He felt that right from the beginning his partner played on this side of his nature by telling him stories that painted herself as a victim. He classifies himself as a people pleaser who did not know how to set boundaries, because he feared his partner getting mad or leaving him. He would take on responsibility to fix everything for everyone at the expense of himself. At the beginning of the relationship, his partner’s mom asked him if he was prepared to take on the severe level of anxiety and depression that his partner experienced. The caretaking side of Dorian kicked in so that he felt he could help and take care of her, so she did not have to experience such negative things. “Whatever it was, I can help you with it”. Dorian realized that she had no friends and felt because he was coming from a better place, that he could help.

Dorian classifies the initial stages of the relationship as being love-bombed by his partner (after which he was devalued & discarded). The reason he thinks that everything felt right, was because she would profess to be into anything that he was, so they appeared very aligned in common.

His partner began to subtly hint and lay the foundation for living together within a few months of their relationship. Dorian stated, “Nobody’s more loving than a narcissist who needs a place to live.” She moved across the street from him very quickly, even though she now had to commute to work. Dorian states that after awhile, he felt that he didn’t have much choice but to allow her to move in. Once Dorian and his partner had kids, on the 2 days out of the week he was at work or if he went out with friends, she would call him and act like “the sky was falling” at home, but then he would rush home to find that everything was ok. He said that she would blow up his phone and talk about how awful it is at home on these occasions. He felt that she knew exactly what she was doing in those moments.

Dorian states that everything was wonderful until they moved in together, at which point she stopped being engaged in his interests, including a sexual relationship. Dorian states that this was markedly different from previous relationship where things gradually settle out over time, it was a “clear change”. The activities that they would do together stopped. Dorian tried to figure out what had changed, what he was doing that was wrong, and where he could improve. He decided that he needed to go to the gym and make himself more attractive and to do more around the house. His partner would attribute negative motives to many of his benign actions and blame him for things that had not occurred to him. When Dorian looks back, he realizes that this was a pattern over the 5 years of the relationship where he tried harder in response to her lack of participation. He feels his partner planted the suggestions around moving in right at the beginning of the relationship and persisted until she got what she wanted, gradually devaluing him over time. Dorian’s partner pushed for a joint account right away. He was making more and paying more, but she would be very stressed about money. She would get upset at him for not being more stressed about it as well. He would take on more shifts, but then she would get upset at him for being away from home more. He would also take on many of the extra household duties and felt that nothing he did was ever appreciated. Dorian observed that his partner would act reasonably in public, but then behind closed doors would either be raging or giving him the silent treatment.

Dorian observed that the kind of abuse that he dealt with in his relationship was all internal. There was “no bruises or scars or cuts or scrapes to see”. He did not feel that she was a safe person to be open with about his feelings because she would “just give me shit” when he did. Dorian began to realize that his partner was very often mad at him about something that was very minor or about something he was doing for his own well-being and would use rage as a tool to get what she wanted. She would say things to him such as, “even your friends agree with me”, and upon checking with his friends, he would

find out that no one had said any such things (in fact often the opposite). He found that she would often physically flirt with other men in front of him and when he would ask her not to do that or express that he wanted those things, he stated that she “lost her shit” and would give him the silent treatment. Dorian states that these moments were often random and unpredictable. Dorian describes the process of devaluing as a “slow roll into it”. “There is no one defining moment where it goes, “Now it’s shit”. He felt that she was destroying him to make herself feel better, that she was attempting to bring him down to her level. It was so gradual, and Dorian began to question how he got there and how he got to the point where he felt like a “beaten dog” all the time.

If Dorian voiced his opinion that something bothered him, he states that he would either get a rage reaction or silent treatment for days. He found the withdrawal to be “devastating” in a small space with no talking. Her reaction would be outsized to the event, that she would “lose her mind” over things like missing out on having a salad that she wanted, or him standing in the wrong grocery line and a massive fight would ensue. She would use name calling. Eventually he would have to be the one to repair things, regardless of how large or small the original issue was or the actual events. He states that their arguments were often circular, and he could see her eyes glaze over if he attempted to explain the logic of his perspective. He states that even now, he still has little conversations with himself in his head about what is going on or what “she might come at me with.” He states that it is really hard to deal with and it feels like there is no reprieve or release from it. He felt that he was always “walking around on eggshells”. Dorian states that she was unpredictable when she would “go off”. He would not know when or what the trigger would be, but that there was always something.

In order to establish some proof about what was happening, Dorian set up a video camera in his room while he was away, which showed that his partner would go in and “trash” his room. The reaction to this from a female friend was that he was “creepy” for doing so.

Dorian felt that he was always the one to blame when something went wrong and even for very minor things. His partner would use what he described as games and guilt trips designed to make him feel this way. Dorian states that he still gets berated for minor things post-breakup. She would accuse him of things and then not accept the proof that he hadn’t done anything, requiring him to “take responsibility” and would stay mad for an extended period at him. She accused him of never apologizing, even though he knew that he was always apologizing “to everybody for everything.” He felt that she was provoking and looking for a reaction so she could then tell him how awful he is for reacting. Dorian states that his partner would start a fight at times but then refuse to tell him what the problem was and punish him for that thing through withdrawal. The treatment he received in this relationship left him feeling like he couldn’t do anything right, that everything was his fault, and that she felt she did everything right. He discovered that this was a similar pattern to her first relationship. “There was nothing I could do that was the

right thing.” He would constantly check in with her and to overanalyze any responses or lack of them. He felt at a loss as far as what more he could do.

Dorian’s partner hated his mom, and she would harp on an issue that didn’t bother him much by insisting to him that it should. She would also lie about things his friends supposedly told her that were negative about him. Dorian’s partner would lie at times to others to make herself sound better at the expense of him, sometimes in front of him. Dorian states that his partner drank a lot and that when she moved out, he discovered hidden alcohol all over the house.

Dorian found that couples counselling was not very productive, that they just ended up fighting in the sessions, and he was just getting blamed by his partner for everything. His partner would agree to certain changes multiple times, but then would immediately revert back to usual behavior. They found a different counsellor, but she stopped going so he went individually.

Dorian feels that he has an amazing group of friends. They expressed amazement that he had gone through such things and one stated “You can’t even make this up...how stupid this is.” Friends would confirm his point of view about his behavior (such as being the most level-headed person they knew, not someone who gets angry). However, he has posted things on Facebook that were important to him and some of his male friends called him out as a “crybaby” for it. He feels this is an attitude that needs to stop. Dorian was told that he was being “too sensitive” and that his feelings were dismissed, instead of validated and encouraging him to feel them.

Dorian states that he was afraid to end the relationship. He wasn’t happy for a long time, but he doesn’t like to quit. Being a People Pleasing Personality (PPP), he felt that he could fix it and would say to himself, “maybe if I just did more...”. He states that he was also afraid of the unknown. Dorian felt prompted to research boundary setting because of his partner’s behavior and false accusations. When he was told he was “too sensitive” he realised that his feelings are his and that it is not up to someone else if his feelings are hurt, and that the behaviors that precipitate the feeling are not ok.

Closer to the end of the relationship, Dorian began to research various behaviors that he was seeing in the relationship and discovered the characteristics of a narcissist + empath relationship and felt they fit that pattern. He wishes that he would have known about this at the beginning of the relationship. This helped him to better understand boundary setting and to learn how to implement them. Educating himself helped him to realize his own mistakes in the relationship, but also to realize that he gave everything that he could to it. Dorian tells his child and other men around him that it’s ok to be angry and upset, but it is how you deal with those feelings that matter. He tries to model validating & encouragement, not dismissal. He has been able to help others going through divorce to label certain dysfunctional behaviors from his own experiences. He finds that many guys

at work will reach out to him privately for guidance because he won't dismiss or laugh at them and allow them space to open up and will validate. Dorian considers that "almost therapeutic" for him to help this way. Dorian regularly goes to counselling which has helped to have a safe place to talk. The therapist helped him to validate his experience and to understand that his ability to look inward was important and normal. Dorian states that he had been grieving the relationship even before it ended. Friends have now noted that Dorian is back, that he has changed for the better since getting out of his relationship. Dorian decided that he wants to LIVE life and that he can do better for himself. He looks back on himself previous to the relationship and tries to capture those actions and feelings back to be a better version of himself. He is moving towards self-betterment by looking forward, reminding himself that there is "nothing back there anymore". Finding people online who talk about similar experiences helped validate what he was going through by hearing the commonalities and insights described. Being able to "tick boxes" around his partner's behaviors and to determine that they are narcissistic felt healing. He feels that it is healthier to redirect his energies into creating happiness for himself and his kids and that is something that he can take control over. The divorce has allowed him to realize that he did not deserve the treatment that he got in the relationship and that nobody deserves to be talked to or snapped at that way. Learning about, and how to enforce boundaries has been helpful to balance out the PPP.

Dorian describes that he felt like a "beaten dog", that he could not do anything right and even when trying to anticipate his partner's needs, that he was always off the mark. Dorian's ex asked for a divorce while he was still trying to fix everything. Dorian realizes that certain things could have been difficult to address in court during his divorce in that he was abused. "No judge is going to look at a six-foot-six, 300-pound guy who's [in a traditionally hyper-masculine career] and say I was abused. They're going to go, 'Yeah, right. Ok'." He felt that was a "huge weight off my shoulders" to separate. He felt massive anxiety and stress for the year after separation (still living in the same space), to the point of having to take medication. His ex still responds to any perceived slight with silent treatment and will cut him off from seeing pictures of his kids and give no communication. Dorian states that on one occasion during their separation he received silent treatment from his ex for 42 days straight. Dorian states that a week after separating, she went for everything, did not want to allow him any time with the kids, and was going for full custody (she eventually agreed to 50/50 eight months later). He states that she will still berate him for things.

Dorian feels now that he can see narcissistic characteristics in someone "a mile away". He feels that he has an "awesome" life and while he would like to have a partner, he does not need one to make things complete. He does not feel himself to be a "victim", but 100% believes that he was abused. He feels that he is now a better version of himself. He is happy and loving life. Dorian feels that his ex's decision to ask for a divorce was the best one she ever made, although it was a terrible experience. He has learned that his partner's behavior is not personal. That no good person is out there to try to destroy

someone and take everything from them with no remorse. He feels that it is important to look inward when going through something like this, to make changes regarding taking on responsibility for other's emotions, and to not let it be at the detriment of the self.

Dorian has learned to try not to engage with his partner anymore so that he does not get sucked into the circular routine: "Responding, not reacting. Observing, not absorbing." He realizes that his reactions are his choice. He is learning to set and enforce boundaries, even at the risk of alienating certain people. He believes that it is not a weakness to talk about what happened to him, but rather strength/courage to be vulnerable and not hide feelings. He feels that everyone deserves to have a partner with whom they can feel safe to talk about their feelings and to be treated well.

28- Vanessa

Vanessa had completed grad school and had launched her career when she met her partner through her work. Vanessa states that it was a male-dominated field and she was struggling to find her place in it. She had recently gotten out of an abusive relationship, from which she was in counselling and taking medication. Vanessa states that her partner was someone who she wouldn't normally have dated because he seemed shy, stable, solid, and protective. He was very encouraging of her at first and she convinced herself that she could be attracted to him because of the promise of security. He was very affirming and encouraging about her role in his life and she feels that it was like a sales pitch to 'get her and to be married. She observed that once he 'had' her, that he no longer had to try. Vanessa classifies herself as a perfectionist, states that she often had performance anxiety, and was really hard on herself. She found that when she couldn't take the pressure of something, she would just quit and lost some opportunities because of it. She saw herself as insecure and someone who had "moods". She describes herself as very accommodating and that there wasn't a reciprocal relationship. She says that her default was always to think that maybe there is something she could do to be a better person. Vanessa always tries to see the good in everyone. She feels that she has a history of not trusting herself and would "blow with the wind" based on what others were saying. She felt that her instinctual voice was much louder at first but diminished over the course of the relationship. Vanessa states that she had an abusive childhood and she always felt that she could never measure up. Even though she was good at school and sport, there was enormous pressure. Her partner grew up in difficult circumstance and Vanessa was aware of his struggles and what he had to do to get where he was in life. She admires his "moxie" and tenacity.

Vanessa believed that she should give forgiveness and stand by her marriage, and that the message may have gotten convoluted around "turn the other cheek" in terms of what that meant. She believes that she should forgive and to be as gracious as possible to be a good Christian. She stated that this prompted her to "keep taking more hits" because she was supposed to keep going in the relationship.

Vanessa felt that at first she was her partner's dream person, but then all of a sudden when he could see her in reality, she was tumbled off of the pedestal- "all of a sudden of course, I have warts and pimples". Their lives together focused on her partner and his career, partially they had a working relationship as well. She put her own career aspirations on hold in favor of his and the family. When he went into a new career, they did not have much else that they did together. Friends also pointed out that everything in the relationship was always about him. This focus increased the more attention he was getting outside of the home. She stated that she felt like she was sitting there "waiting for scraps". A year in, Vanessa felt very alone. When they were getting married, she questioned whether he was the right person. He had stopped coming home and saying any of the things he said in the beginning. He was very successful and paying attention to his career. "all of a sudden, I was just really alone". She decided that it was her who was the problem and that she would have to work and try harder. She did not feel connected to him, but "took it on the chin" anyway in favor of supporting him.

Vanessa had started to plan getting out of the marriage a couple of years in due to the shift to one sided focus, but then became pregnant and decided that she would have to "dig in". Vanessa took on caring for her child with special needs so that her partner could continue on as usual. She was also left with all of the tasks around the home and describes it as being a servant to her partner's work. She would justify this to herself because her partner needed to rest in order to perform at the high level he did. She described taking on more and more and still working full-time while her partner would lay on the couch. She wishes that they could make decisions together but saw that her partner had his own life and was focused on that and his friends.

Vanessa's partner started to keep track of what she was doing all day and she felt like she was reporting in so he could determine if it was a valid contribution. She felt like she was under evaluation. Vanessa states that she always felt that everything was her fault and that she was driven to make up for her mistakes to her partner. She was beating herself up and would review her mistakes. She ended up feeling like she let her partner down. When they would have problems, she would wonder if she was not being attentive enough, or too selfish. She wondered what she could have done to allow him to feel more comfortable with her choices, especially once she had returned to work. Tara's partner would tell her that she was so insecure, so she would think there was some merit in that and that she needed to do better and become more secure.

Vanessa felt that she was always the butt of the jokes, and her son has learned this from her partner. She was told that she is overreacting, sensitive, or histrionic. She would eventually get upset and then would get made fun of for being dramatic. He would use veiled humor in public, making fun and teasing. "Humor with a knife in it". It was hard to put a finger on what was wrong with it because it would feel like a put down but would be disguised. This made her question her own sanity until other people started noticing, although they didn't say anything until she started talking about it herself. If she said

something about his comments being below the belt, there would be a “terrible” retaliation in the moment and punishment later. This could look like yelling and using specific, hurtful language, such as saying she was like her mother (considered a bad insult). He would name call and call her crazy and tell that this was all in her head when she would bring things up to him.

Vanessa felt that no matter what she did, she was not doing enough and states even now she is still wondering what she could have done better. She felt that it was a combination of her inclination to feel that way due to her childhood, but also that was reinforced by her partner. It felt like she was always disappointing him. He would often say that there was something she needed to do more of, and she could see his point of view so she would try harder. Things would get better temporarily and then would not be enough again. She felt that she always had to reinvent herself upon her partner’s whim. “I’d try something else.” “I’ll be funnier. Okay, now I’ll be a lot more serious, Okay, now I’ll be more...”. It was never enough. Vanessa states that she was willingly changing things but could never reach a point of satisfaction for him. “I always felt like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.” Vanessa developed a large and constant anxiety when things would be going well because inevitably it could turn horribly wrong very quickly, that she would let him down again”. Vanessa states that she “minces” around and is very accommodating to avoid inflaming him. Vanessa described her partner as a “huge person with a wild temper”. He didn’t hit but was a vicious fighter. He would say the most painful things he possibly could. He attacks very quickly to perceived slights and Vanessa perceives it as a form of control that he uses.

Once her partner changed careers and she was not needed in a professional sense, she didn’t know what she could do now that she could no longer fulfill that need. She states that was a turning point when the relationship really began to struggle. She feels that she was very hard on herself and that she cannot take a compliment. She states that, “I stopped being myself. I stopped even knowing what myself was”. She started to view herself as, “a woman who couldn’t get over my pain”, so as a consequence, she stopped telling anyone anything. She would “put a face on and go through the motions. She felt she had lost her former abilities and forgot what her own likes were. Her partner would say no to things she wanted to do or loved, and so they wouldn’t happen. She feels that she abandoned herself, “so of course he wasn’t going to like me.” Looking at past pictures, Vanessa states that she can visibly see her hunched, rounded, and awkward appearance standing behind her partner. She feels that she looks ugly and shrouded. She felt that her instinctual voice got fainter and fainter throughout the relationship. Vanessa began to start keeping a low profile to escape notice and to cope. “My life was absorbed into his life.” She describes that being in the shadows was a safe place because she didn’t feel good about herself and that she was hiding behind her partner.

Vanessa realises now that the things that were causing her to wonder/suspect and feel insecure were actually taking place. She said that that messed with her head and made her

feel like he only did those things because she wasn't enough. She found it hard to trust her instincts and that she lost this ability because of this relationship.

Her partner had an affair early on in the relationship and they attended counselling for it. Vanessa then found out at the end of the relationship that her partner had been cheating on her via a text that was sent to her accidentally.

Vanessa recalls moments where she would "rear up" and get angry, but then she felt that she would be squashed down.

Vanessa found it confusing because her partner did not fit what she knew narcissism to be- charismatic, funniest, most popular, so it was harder for her to define what was happening in the relationship. She states that she did not completely have the vocabulary to describe her feelings. When Vanessa tries to think about events that happened in the relationship, she feels her head swimming and that she can't quite grab a hold of the truth. "I feel like I'm swirling in a vortex". Not being alone in the past was a way to face some of the pain that she would feel, so she would keep herself busy and distract herself from what was happening. Vanessa was offered a way out of her marriage early on, but then found out she was pregnant, found God, and decided that she was going to be the best mom and person, and couldn't contemplate how she could leave. She told her partner at some point later that she was going to leave and he was devastated and couldn't believe that she would leave, even though he had previously had an affair and told her she shouldn't believe what others were saying. She was ashamed that she was letting him down. Vanessa stayed because she attributed fault to herself. She feels she would still be there if her partner hadn't made the decision for them. She dug in and became "the best, most subservient woman even on the planet". Vanessa kept telling herself that maybe it was all in her head, even when she could see that there would be no reciprocity. She states that she would make excuses to herself and others. "I think I was probably the best person to be married to him throughout this thing because I really got it." (re: high performance job).

Vanessa states that things really started to go downhill in the relationship when she went back to her career "the wheels started to fall off the cart". That is when she states that they started fighting a lot because suddenly she was getting attention. He started to disappear more and travel more for work or not come home. She was feeling better about herself, getting her career back and he just "up and left one day" and told her he didn't want to be married to her anymore. She hadn't realised that he was already planning to marry someone else. She didn't see it coming. This "messed with my sense of trust in myself and others, and my abilities. She found that her partner would "swoop in" and "now he's a super-hero, and everything he does is so big" because he decided to become more involved with the children.

Going back to her work reminded her of what she loved to do, she remembered what she was good at, was starting to meet people and was excited again. Vanessa had some girlfriends who had similar issues and they also felt that they were struggling with their sanity so she had a sense of camaraderie in that. It became the “club of crazy women”. Taking quiet time has been helpful, but she is starting to feel the need to talk about what has happened, to connect with others, and to be heard. Vanessa’s family was furious with her partner and wanted her to get revenge by taking as much as she could in the divorce, which she did not want to do. People had a hard time with how accommodating she was being to her partner and she feels that she lost sympathy and respect based on the way that she handled things. However, people are recognizing that there is growth. She has noticed that there are some people in her life who do not like the change from being a “shrinking violet” and are not comfortable or want to talk about it. Not having validation for her new choices makes her wonder if her friends are really her friends and to question some of her choices. Chatting with one friend has allowed her to face some hard truths about the way that she has been living and that she had given all of her “power and permission to live” away. Talking with some friends has helped her to see that it is problematic to excuse away certain people’s behavior because that leads to enabling/co-dependence. One in particular pointed out that this was a pattern for her, and it became a wake-up call. A Christian psychologist framed it as part of God’s plan, however, what she found very helpful, was a friend (who was a psychologist) who said to her in no uncertain terms, that there was no excuse for what had been happening in her relationship and divorce. It felt like that was new information that helped her to see through the deception. Ongoing counselling has helped her in some ways, but at times can trigger depressive symptoms when she goes deep. Vanessa realized that she needed to take some time to get “quiet” and to spend time with herself to face the “dark things”. She needed to listen to her instinct again and told people that she was going through something difficult and while she valued opinions, she needed to listen to herself for awhile. Vanessa is realizing that maybe she is better off alone for awhile and almost feels like skipping town for awhile to start over.

Vanessa gave herself permission to sit, think, meditate and pray. This allowed her to get in touch with what she truly feels and to sort out her feelings. Medication has helped with anxiety, depression, and the stress that she has been carrying. Vanessa has given herself permission to be good at things again, to have fun, and is more accepting of certain aspects of herself. She is learning not be hard on herself. Vanessa is meeting people who are validating her right to be at school, so she feels that she needs to step forward and accept the opportunities, even though she still feels like fighting against them. Vanessa has witnessed the toll that this has taken on her son and wants to have the energy to be with him and enjoy the time. She wants to model a life that she would wish for him to have. It allows her to question why she was so afraid to have these things for herself. She wants to show him that being a martyr in a relationship is not a good thing. Vanessa states that she allowed others to tell her who she was and that she believed what people said, until things no longer added up for her. She realizes that she needs to work on

rebuilding self-esteem again. Vanessa has allowed her passion for her work to come through in mentoring younger girls in her field, to have voices to say no, and to give themselves permission to be as big as possible.

Vanessa suggests that she is still very accommodating. She is struggling with trying to reduce her perfectionist tendencies. She has chosen to self-isolate because she is not sure that she could be in another relationship again. This relationship had been so hard on her self-esteem. She has yet to emotionally move on and feel good about herself or to have completely gotten herself back. She has not yet gotten past her large fear that something will soon go wrong, even when things might actually be going well. She still cannot receive compliments and nothing she does is good enough in her mind= battling for self-worth. She feels that her cognitive dissonance between what she knows to be true and what she feels to be true has become much worse as an aspect of this relationship, but at least now, she states that she can see the valley/gulf, whereas during, she might not have. She wonders why she is struggling to move on. One of the things she states that is hard to reconcile, is that she no longer trusts her instincts. She still wonders what she could have done better to make him feel more included, or if that would have changed the outcome. She still feels intensely loyal to her ex and almost feels the need to get permission to do things like date again, however she realizes that this is “whacky”. She is feeling a sense of imposter syndrome about going to grad school and that she doesn’t deserve to be there, to have another relationship, or accolades, and will play that down when received. She feels that she is just starting to “wake up” to process all of what happened. She feels that she is starting to grow larger again but is scared of it. She feels that she does not have permission or that she doesn’t deserve it but is starting to allow herself to reach out to those things she likes/wants. She says that she has come out of the shadows to reclaim bits of her life. Beginning to know and accept herself has helped things to begin to make sense as to why things happened the way they did. She is ready to face/see what is really going on. She feels she is close to giving herself permission to be ok. She will not allow someone to tell her who she is and she is working on getting a good sense of herself. She knows now that she is not crazy and that she is not 100% to blame.

Vanessa is aware that holding herself to impossible standards is not healthy thinking and that she does not want to go forward in life that way. She has noticed her son is beginning to replicate his father’s treatment of her and realizes that she has to do something about it. Vanessa is still discovering again the things that she was good at and the things that she loved to do. She has learned that it is important to trust herself and her instincts. She is learning to be gracious and to be nice with herself in a way that she has always been with others. She wishes she had paid more attention to her instinctual voice. Vanessa has realised that there is no excuse for her partner’s behavior and that she has to face that she did this for a lot of people in her life. She knows now that no one has the right to make you give yourself to the relationship so that you stop being who you are. You should not give up what makes you amazing and wonderful to please someone else. No relationship

is worth it. No one has the right to take someone else's power. She would encourage others "to listen to that small voice that's saying you matter".

29- Iris

Iris met her partner in her early 30s, has a number of degrees (including a graduate degree), and had an established career in her field, as well as a successful side-career. Her partner seemed very giving, thoughtful, and caring, paying attention to what her life was about. He made sure that Iris's family and friends liked him by making an effort to do things for them. They moved a number of times during the relationship. Iris sees herself as a nonconfrontational person who would rather avoid than be involved in conflict. She states that she has always been easy-going/chill and flexible. She has always been a happy person and hard-working. She sees herself as strong and independent, with an education and the ability to support herself. She wanted to be caring, loving, and nurturing in her relationship. Iris came from a loving and kind family and states that she didn't even know what NPD was until she was getting her divorce. She was brought up not to speak back, just to "deal with it" and not get angry. Iris believes that her partner's mother was a narcissist and very controlling as well, which translated down a generation. Red Flags were seen right at the beginning. Iris feels that she should have trusted her instincts but put them aside because everyone in her life thought her partner was wonderful. This caused her to second-guess herself and to decide it was her problem. Iris noticed that her partner would not be the nicest when he was drinking. He was arrogant and belittling to other people, but it was minimal enough that she could brush it aside..

Iris's partner had a public persona which was about the "optics of him looking good". Initially, he presented to her what he knew she wanted to see. The arrogant and belittling behavior that Iris previously noticed turned on her when it was too late- she felt "locked in" and "stuck". His attentive behavior stopped. Iris states that she really started to see this once she had given up her career and had children. The events built up over time and were cumulative rather than just one-off things that made sense out of context. Iris was financially dependent on her partner and feels that it became a financially abusive situation. She felt trapped and didn't know how to get out with 2 kids and no money, though he was very well-off. She states that they didn't have joint accounts even though her salary was much less. He refused to put anything in her name, even their home or a car he gave her. He would tell her that she could only be on title to their property if she contributed to it financially. She paid for many of the items for the household and children and he would not give her more when she would run out, which created fights. She would have to keep a running tab on everything she spent and states that was when things started to go downhill. She had to be completely transparent about finances, but he never did. His mother would monitor and critique her spending as well.

Her partner regularly expressed that it was "inconvenient" for her family to be coming to visit, or he would not give her money for a plane ticket, so she became more isolated. He

then moved his parents upstairs and across from them so that they could see into Iris's condo. She states that his parents would come in all the time without warning because they had a key given to them by her partner. Iris felt that her partner and his parents were watching her all of the time and that she had no privacy.

Iris stated that her partner expected everything to be done in the household without his participation and without support. She felt it was very 1-sided. His needs were met, while hers were not, including the type of contact that they had with their respective families. Everything began to revolve around his life and family and there was nothing involving hers. She stated that she "didn't even have my own life". She had no privacy and even vacations were always with his family. She states that was when things really began to fall apart. Iris let a lot of things go because she felt that she was walking on eggshells as a result of her partner's reactions. Iris felt that everything in the relationship was always her fault. She states that her partner would never apologize and would somehow twist things around to the point that she didn't understand what happened anymore. If Iris was ever to be confrontational, there would be some form of repercussion like verbal abuse, belittling, not getting her allowance, and/or making life difficult somehow.

Iris states that she got really "beat down" because of the control, financial control, and not knowing how to get the kids out too. She feels she lost her confidence as a result. She just wanted to keep the peace. However, the relationship and conflict "sucked the energy out of" her so she would try to avoid it or give in. Iris felt there was a lack of systematic support to get out of her relationship (not geared to emotional/psych. abuse). Iris felt the need to protect her kids which made it tougher to leave. She did not want him to have control over the kids.

Iris wanted her family to come out to visit around Christmas time because they hadn't seen her or the kids in awhile. Her partner kept giving her possible dates and renegeing until her father passed away. She was dealing with the estate and was flying back and forth, so when she got back, she just wanted to be home with her kids. Her partner took them instead to his family's vacation home elsewhere, so she had to change her ticket to go there. She was forced to be social with his family and friends and entertain after dealing with the loss of her father (so that she could be with her kids). It was the last place she wanted to be after all that. One of the friends asked her about her mom and she states that she "lost it."

Iris stated that her separation was very high-conflict and that he was nasty. He hired a PI to try to dig up dirt, and tried to bankrupt her, after stealing all of her documents so he could figure out how much money she had. She had to live with him an extra 6 months because she was afraid to leave the children so that she would not be considered to have abandoned them. She states that she slept with a knife under her pillow and that it was horrible. He had not physically attacked her before their separation but was acting weird and had done things like gripping her really hard and locked her in the closet. He would

not allow her to take anything when she moved out including things that they had doubles of for the children, or things that her family had given her. He even booked the elevator when she was due to move out so that she could not use it. She anticipated such things and took a witness along. He would unpack things that she had packed, but she was able to take certain things because of her witness. He would buy designer things for the kids, while she could barely afford the least expensive necessities. He tried to claim that he was 100% caregiver, doctored his travel documents, and stole her diaries to cover his story so that he could get full custody. He was caught lying by the court because of credit card statements.

She states that it was incredibly exhausting and everything had to go through lawyers. He used the kids against her and put them in the middle, telling them that, “daddy loves them more than mommy does” and other “psychologically messed up” things. She states that he put her through the ringer and still used the court 5 years after their divorce. He often will not pay child support when he is upset with her. He will still keep the kids sometimes on her parenting days. Parenting days had to be changed because he refused to take the kids to lessons that fell on his days because it was not about him. He held her small business “hostage” and it took her 5 years to get it back. Iris states that she had no life for the first few years after her divorce because of all of the research she had to do to self-represent in court.

Iris realized that she had to leave and protect her kids because her partner was belittling them too. She has begun to feel safer now that her kids are old enough to tell her what goes on with their father and can defend themselves. Iris began to research her partner’s behavior because her separation was so high conflict and noticed that narcissism kept coming up. She realized that he fit many of the traits and this provided a way of understanding what had happened in the relationship. Iris has the support of some girlfriends, but many of them and her mom, still think that her partner is wonderful, because they never saw him in the way she described. She still wonders if some of them think that she was lying. Her self-view of independence, strength, and ability to support herself helped to get through the tougher parts of the divorce. Iris states that her ex does not want to reveal what he has been doing (keeping it from his new partner), so Iris will let him know that she will tell his new partner unless he gets current with child support or returns the kids as he is supposed to. Iris started to self-represent in court because she could not afford the lawyer’s fees, however, has realized that it costs her ex a lot of money every time he takes her to court again or goes through a lawyer. She learned a lot about family law as a result. Counselling has helped to deal with the divorce, this high conflict person, and to help protect her children. There was some support that she could lean on because evidence built up over the years that her partner was not who he represented himself to be. It took years to accumulate data and records to be able to show her position to the court. It also helped as a reminder to record things since she would sometimes forget past events. She states that she has 8 file boxes worth of documentation, not including that of the lawyers. Iris learned to take a noncaring stance (Grey Rock

Technique) when challenged instead of getting emotionally charged so that interactions were more effective. Iris found that she was drawn to people who had an understanding of what she had experienced.

Iris thinks that her personality type was easy to take advantage of because she is so nice. However, now she feels she has a thicker skin now and will speak back- she has a voice again. She still sees herself as a strong and independent person who is able to support herself. She has been able to regain confidence once she was able to get away from the court system (tie to ex) and regain some of the finances she had lost because of it. She has learned to stand up for herself more against her ex's efforts to control her. She no longer feels the need to protect herself by continually documenting events with her ex.

Iris would advise people to trust their instincts/red flags and not to override them, or to let others take advantage of their kindness. She advises never to give up your financial independence. Iris realizes that a narcissist needs people around them to give admiration and as long as it is given, things will be relatively positive. She points out that you can't win with a narcissist.

Appendix C: Alphabetical Code List

Acceptance	PNT acceptance of abuse label or that INT behaviors were not ok. Knowledge that INT will never fully understand or admit their role/responsibility for treatment & negatives in the relationship. May experience valid anger at treatment. Not an acceptance of abuse
Addiction	INT- misuses alcohol, drugs, gambling
Admiration	Ego stroking of INT- PNT needing to feed narcissistic supply to avoid blow-ups/confrontation. Requiring a great deal of energy to revolve around INT emotional needs
Agreeable	PNT personality= accommodating to others needs and desires/willing to fulfill, self-sacrificing, flexible to needs of partner & others--> allow INT needs to be central over self, history of prioritizing others, very often willing to give benefit of the doubt. Will justify away negative behaviors in others eager to please (normally might be healthy in typical relationship when boundaries can also be set or is reciprocal), social peacekeeper. People Pleaser Personality. INT can take advantage of PNT's good nature=trusting. Loose boundaries. Flexible: Can bend to change to new INT desires, blows with the wind.
Anger & Frustration	PNT= quicker to irritable, anger & more intense frustration due to needs not being met, doing overload of emotional, relationship, household, or work labour, & never being listened to/heard or valued. Needs may be unexpressed for fear of reprisal.
Anxiety	Created or amplified by push/pull of relationship + unpredictability/uncertainty, and/or fear of omnipresent covert threat of withdrawal or rage.
Asserting Boundaries	Establishing healthy ideas around boundaries, recognizing when they are breached, and/or asserting them when they are breached. Mindful of not caretaking others in the way that did in relationship. Will speak up/challenge/communicate needs/stand up for self/protect self first. Will no longer justify & make excuses for other's behavior. Can now identify this form of dysfunction. Feels OK to say 'No' or to walk away. Healthy limits of trust. Giving grace & forgiveness of self. Has learned that it is not wrong to love deeply (self-admire characteristics that might have been taken advantage of by INT).

Attachment	Emotional attachment trauma from childhood or past relationships
Attraction- INT Characteristics & Actions	What about the INT drew the PNT in- charismatic, charming, "nice" intelligent, status, respected, stable/together, fun, adventurous, persistent, grand-gestures/gifts, attentive, observant
Benefit of the Doubt	PNT stays in relationship & gives partner the BOTD. Begins to question self & perceptions of events/understanding due to divergence of present reality from past, in favor of INT perspective, gives INT more credibility than themselves due to strength of INT convictions, or sudden examples of positive change
Binding	Commitments, material goods, integrated=family/ friends/ kids/ community, ownership of large items. Increases when INT senses PNT leaving = CARROT
Body Image	Feels body is not good enough- feels pressure to lose or gain weight due to never feeling good enough. Focus on appearance maintenance. May lose weight due to stress. May be due to overt or covert INT suggestions, but sometime internal pressure
Caretaker	Desire to care for others, PNT sees themselves as a helper, take on emotional responsibility for others, wants to fulfill INT needs. Allows INT to take advantage
Charming Façade	INT has credibility/likeability with others because of how they present. People may not give the same credit to the PNT = overshadowed.
Cheated On	INT will deny, call PNT ridiculous for accusing or being suspicious. Sometimes will move from covert to overt cheating behaviors= not caring if caught as a way to test boundaries & to minimize PNT importance
Chosen	Felt special & chosen by INT partner= thus becomes a very important relationship
Codependence	Reliance on the relationship: to do with INT control, psych abuse- finances, promises, putdowns etc. (covert & overt)= lowered self-esteem, questioning self. This allows INT to keep PNT close while still behaving badly

Coercively Controlled	Manipulated for a purpose that pushes past PNT boundaries. INT lacks empathy in these situations. PNT may feel intimidated/threatened into fulfilling INT desires, either covertly or overtly. May feel like a sexual/object. May be manipulated or pushed into having children
Community of Understanding	PNT Having people who have experienced or can understand behaviors & outcomes of PNT-INT relationships. These people have the ability to validate PNT experiences. May include friends, colleagues, support groups, church groups etc....
COMPLICATING FACTORS	Discrepant data code- May include participants who have had trauma from multiple narcissistic and/or abusive partners, or the INT may be dealing with addictions, mental health issues, secret children, sexual offenses, official narcissistic diagnosis etc... which affect the relationship in specific ways from the rest of the participants.
Conditioned	Training the PNT with unspoken rules & expectations via disapproval, critiques, withdrawal, rage. Similar to an intermittent reward system (such as from push-pull dynamic)
Conflict	Higher frequency and/or seriousness of conflicts. Increases over time
Confusion	INT actions causes confusion for PNT about what they are feeling or "should" be feeling. Result of walking on eggshells & anxiety
Controlled	INT makes the decisions for relationship, living space, and sometimes work. PNT- might be required to regularly check in, lifestyle is organized around INT needs/wants. INT may create/capitalize on a situation where they want PNT partner to be dependent & then uses it against them (white knight façade). Sometimes INT may express jealousy at perceived betrayal as an excuse to get what they want (possessive/object). May put covert "speedbumps" in the way of success. May prevent PNT opportunity. PNT may feel the need to get permission- either implied or actual from INT
COPING & RECOVERY	Often begins before relationship is over (may sometimes be catalyst for PNT to leave or INT to back away). PNT is beginning to choose self and to see possibilities outside of the relationship. When power balance begins to shift closer to center

Couples Therapy	Attempts to repair the relationship. Often ineffective- either INT cannot take responsibility, refuses to continue, presents façade/lies//therapist presents as "dance" where both parties have responsibilities & INT will use against PNT. Alternatively, therapist recognizes INT characteristics & can only help individual. Narcissistic tendencies may be identified & labelled.
Crazy"	PNT may be called/IMPLIED that by INT whenever questioned or challenged. PNT may doubt self & question their perceptions/instincts= PNT questions whether they are overthinking. Effect= reduced feeling of credibility & less pushback/resistance towards INT. Often a result of manipulation/gaslighting
Culture	Specific cultural views around marriage and partnership can encourage staying or valuing financial stability over mental health. May not acknowledge mental health issues
Debt	Often due to excessive INT spending. Often using PNT funds. Serves as binding PNT further to dyad.
Devalued & Reduction	Happens privately. Purpose is to diminish PNT & to feel superior-->crush PNT/self esteem. Covert & overt. Backhanded compliments. Tells PNT how badly they are doing. INT takes identity & status credit at PNT expense. Leads to further isolation. PNT= ignored, mocked, treated as an inconvenience, worse over time
DEVOLUTION	Extreme ups & downs of relationship, when curtain lifts on full personality traits. May explain why relationship lasted as long as it did- INT feeling more in control therefore comfortable to allow negative behaviors to emerge. Love bombing/incentives to stay/binding & anger/withdrawal happens in cycles- similar to any cycle of abuse + carrot +stick (review graphic) Resulting in- 'Trauma Bond' (involves intensity, complexity, inconsistency, & a promise)
Difficulty Trusting	PNT becomes uncertain about who they can trust (including themselves) because they may have overridden their instincts about their partner or had a different judgement about who that person was at first. This person who is supposed to care seems to want to destroy them.

Discredited	Publicly, may not even happen in front of PNT= portrayal to others). To reduce credibility of PNT to others. Happens personally & professionally. For INT to feel superior & in control with PNT diminished. So PNT looks like the "bad" partner. = more control + limited PNT choices
Emotionally Vulnerable	PNT description of self or situation at onset of relationship. Naïve, doormat, youth, age difference, recent break-up, difficult or large life transition (family death), FOO, personality, health issues, high stress
Empathy	Empathetic, able/desire to see others' perspectives in conflict, allows for INT to play victim
Enabling	Flying monkeys: Sometimes family & friends of INT will help to create an environment of self-importance for INT. Will support INT perspective no matter what. INT may deliberately surround themselves with "yes" people. ("minions")
END/FALLOUT	The end of the relationship- what happens in the aftermath, how does the PNT experience it. Some-INTs can't handle rejection, often high conflict. PNT sometimes has been developing a plan/strategy/fantasy to leave far in advance, years on occasion. Courts, fear, fight or flight.
ENMESHMENT	Intertwining in a highly intense way while establishing relationship
Examining Beliefs	Reframing. PNT allowing/permission to put self first- it is ok to take care of self. Challenges relationship beliefs
Exhausted	Drained. Feels it takes too much to stand up for self, no energy to do anything but survive
Façade Dropping	Balance of power shift when INT feels safe in PNT commitment, ceases to present positive façade to PNT (*exception- if PNT appear to be stepping away because INT behavior has gone too far), increase of demands from the PNT occurs, usually noticeably drops 'nice' facade after commitment-deepening turning points
Fear of Loneliness	PNT afraid to be on own, of loneliness that would be felt outside of the relationship because partner has become central to everything
Fear of Loss/High investment	Fear of losing what seems like everything (including INT), high investment- PNT had already invested a lot into the relationship= doubles down. Fear of unknown, financial losses, relationship/rejection.

Financial Entitlement	Aspect of control. Could be financial abuse. Using PNT funds for common or INT expenses, extravagant/status-based items in service of self. Often using PNT funds, control of \$, may be underemployed/job loss with PNT picking up bulk of work out of necessity
Focus	Relationship & individual actions become centered around INT needs/wants-->no room to think about self or ask for needs, not allowed to have expectations. Result of agreeableness & flexibility
Future Planning	Making plans for a future that doesn't include INT, being excited/open to opportunities that may come
Gaslit	INT assertions manipulate PNT into questioning self & perceptions. Blows things out of proportion & then calls PNT "too sensitive". Always PNT fault. Requests activities & then uses against PNT
Grooming	Strategic: both covert & overt suggestions to get what INT wants, subtly pushing boundaries to shift further each time, setting the foundations for future INT wants
High Conflicts	Due to separation- higher frequency and/or seriousness of conflict. Often strategic
"Humor"	Jokes at PNT expense to disguise put downs/derogatory comments, both in front of others & to devalue privately. Told "too sensitive", "you're taking it wrong"
Imbalance	Because all is focused on INT, PNT does emotional labour for relationship & household tasks/management. Indicates that PNT has no right to complain- needs to try harder, shaming, withdrawal of affection used as tools. Could be power imbalance
INCENTIVIZED	Cycle that INT will initiate if they feel that PNT may be stepping away. Offerings designed to pull PNT back into the relationship. May be tangible, events or, behaviors
Independence	Getting it back, or new sense of it- Job, school. Validation: exposed to external ideas, validated abilities, financial security, self-efficacy/esteem--> push back on relationship dynamics & beliefs, motivated to prove INT wrong, often happens prebreakup= ego threat to INT (turning point)

INSTINCTS	Recognition of red flags early on, justified away in favor of partner's explanations/forceful beliefs, or to keep peace, start to feel can't trust self (instincts) because of repetitive implication/suggestions, or outbursts that say the opposite, question perceptions (up is down/twilight zone), IGNORED: do not often end up acting on feelings because of giving benefit of the doubt & wanting to smooth over or keep relationship
INT Family of Origin	May enable INT behavior towards their partner or provide a model of behavior. Creates a foundation of behavior normalization & acceptance. Or INT/mentally ill parent demanding
INT Personality	Notable things about the public INT persona that attracts or keeps PNT in relationship longer-term. Patterns with partners, family & friends
Intimidated	Overt & covert- used when other control tactics fail- may include subtle hints of violence towards PNT or pets. Body language, 'joking' threats, random threats suggesting what INT 'could' do, property damage
Isolation	Little or less contact/support because of relationship (sometimes due to moving a lot). Sometimes jealousy at perceived betrayal is used as an excuse for INT to get mad/isolate further (possessive/object). Due to wedges, shame, age gap, focus on INT needs, relocation, others distancing due to INT behavior
Justified Behavior	Rationalizations/justifications & denials--> allows PNT to justify to self and excuse to keep the relationship together
Kids	Role modeling for kids, protecting from negative patterns, exposing to alternative behaviors
Labelling	Language for understanding and putting a label on INT behaviors
Lack of Understanding	Feeling that people wouldn't 'get it', or believe the extent of the abuse (because it is often covert) & people don't necessarily see it- difficult to explain, not concrete, more cumulative
Lonely	Within relationship. Partner not there- often travelling for work etc...., away from friend/fam physically or emotionally. INT separates self/chooses not to come home. Lonely while partner there due to lack of reciprocity & support)
Long Game	INT manipulates to set the stage early for relationship commitment & greater enmeshment, willing to wait patiently while making intentions known, knowing when to "strike".

LONGEVITY	Long term relationship & reasons why. Barriers to leaving
Lost Self/ Empty Shell/ Self-Doubt	"Shell of a human", exhausted, drained. Not knowing or trusting self. Self-doubt
Love Bombed	Especially in the very beginning, persistent wooing & grand-gestures, romantic, persuasive, noticing things others don't. May give excessive gifts
Lying	Intended to deceive PNT- INT changes narrative to suit purpose in moment= confusion for PNT, questions own understanding, made to feel crazy. INT may do it for fun to watch the effect on PNT
Manipulated	Often covert. Suggestions/comments/putdowns designed to change behavior. Exploits vulnerabilities/kindness, agreeableness, flexibility-->strategically push buttons, sometimes overt hostility. Result= PNT can't trust feelings/INT never wrong. Game playing with PNT emotional, life, head.
Medication	To help with anxiety, stress, or depression- treats ongoing issue that wasn't there before relationship or was magnified
Meeting	First impressions of INT. Some PNTs disliked or liked partner right away (polarized), may have been won over by persistence/pursuit/pressure from others. Others found them highly charming & attractive
Mental Health	INT-mental health issues- bipolar, depression, anxiety etc....
Mental State	PNT thoughts and feelings that prevent leaving
Mentoring	Helping others with lessons learned & strength & resilience, but also helps PNT to cope
Modelling	Method of recovery-Demonstrating wisdom & lessons learned
Name Called	To reduce PNT credibility
Negative Self-Talk	Telling self messages that "beat up" or tear down. Inability to see own value/worth
Never Good Enough	Told covertly & overtly not doing well/not doing enough. Regular & changing/unpredictable critiques=arbitrary in moment. Keep PNT confused/crushed. Keeps PNT from catching onto INT behavior, "moving target"= constantly having to prove self & trying harder. Learned helplessness
New Partner	Provides contrast. PNT can see that there are possibilities to meet kind people, helps PNT to reclaim desirability

No Room to Breathe	No space to process feelings, make sense of events, or to contemplate life outside of the relationship
No Voice	The longer in the relationship= less of a voice. All needs in service to INT-acceding all decisions to INT. Exhausted/not worth the fight--> out of touch with self. Mirroring: INT takes over feelings- if PNT claims emotion=INT does likewise to shift attention/blame & magnifies-->INT =claims to be real victim=PNT not heard/ignored
Noticing façade	PNT begins to realise there are 2 distinct sides of INT personality= private & public persona. INT is a "social chameleon" depending on who is in front of them. INT talks a 'good game' but not backed by action, wooing vs manipulative/aggressive or indifference/withdrawal, charisma vs unlikeable/pretentious/grandiose, status seeking
Numb	PNT becomes out of touch with feelings, safer to feel nothing. Distracted by other things
Pedestal	In the beginning- boosting ego, frequent admiration, priority, most loved, felt special to INT
Perfect	INT appears like the perfect soulmate/partner, deep/quick connection
Persistence	Persistence in wooing even with rejection, flattering with repeated attention
PNT Family of Origin	FOO creates conditions that make PNT vulnerable to INT behaviors
PNT Personality	Personality factors that may have promoted longevity in the relationship
Positive Outlook	Taking away learning, value, & ideas for opportunity & possibility of a happy future
Prey	Feels like predator-prey relationship, exploiting emotional vulnerability & insecurities- youth, age difference, capitalized on
Promised	INT paints beautiful image of the future- perfect life together- marriage, family, trips, material items. Often when PNT is contemplating leaving= big grand gestures. Often doesn't follow through
Proof	Journaling, documenting, emails/texts, recordings- most often to try to make sense of events of the relationship/process/remember, hard to put a finger on covert psych abuse, sometimes used for court. Helps to confirm instincts

Protecting & Covering	PNT protects others from the truth of INT behaviors or covers for INT (cleans up mistakes etc...). May be due to PNT experiencing shame/humiliation/embarrassment about truth of relationship. Belief in responsibility to partner. Justifying behavior to avoid the truth--> isolation, loneliness, less support
PSYCHOLOGICALLY ABUSED	Often covert, especially at first- comments, jokes, suggestions of being lesser than. Increases over time
Punished	Covert- Often subtle, INT uses to get own way, withdrawal of self/affection, demonstrative to others as a contrast, ghosting= STICK
Push/Pull	Abuse cycle- addictive cycle of wooing & abuse (may look like rage and/or withdrawal). Making up/breaking up. Wooing when INT senses losing control of relationship/PNT= love bombing just enough until pulls PNT back in= strategic. Grand promises that are meaningful to PNT, persuasive= could make PNT feel lowest or highest/greatest (massive peaks & valleys)= drama--> creates walking on eggshells/anxiety/confusion. Intermittent reward system
Rage	Anger & aggression. May be yelling. Designed to intimidate PNT into getting own way, threat of leaving/control, "time bomb"=unpredictable--> walking on eggshells not to set off
Rapid Progression	Romantically intense right away, wooing with promises commitment & ideal future
Red Flags	Questionable behavior. May emerge early on in relationship, (sometimes before entering= strong dislike), often at major turning points when INT feels they 'have' their partner
Reinforced Manipulation	How the INT creates conditions to continue manipulations. Generally, after the abuse cycle has completed or the PNT may be pushing away.
Relationship Beliefs	Beliefs around relationships & marriage that may contribute to longevity
Release/Crying	Talking & purging events, not carrying emotional burden anymore
Research	Researching events in the relationship & partner's behavior helps to makes sense of it- researching narcissism, to understand why & how, to realise that they are not at fault. Knowledge helps in healing

RESISTANCE	PNT response to psychological abuse & manipulation. Humor, pushback, independence, research- attempts to understand/make sense of, examining cognitive dissonance, motivated to prove INT wrong
Romantic Beliefs	May lean towards idealistic, marriage is forever, must fight for relationship at all costs
Routine	Developing or reestablishing a routine that includes or focuses on the self
Scrutinized	Regular critiques, tracking behavior- monitoring, double standard → can never get right
Seen	INT = uncanny understanding of thing & characteristics that are meaningful to & about PNT, figures out likes/dislikes/quirks/characteristics quickly, observant, insightful, ability to fulfill needs & join with PNT in activities/likes, can take advantage of insecurities because of depth of understanding
Self-Care	Meditation, yoga, journaling, exercise, affirmations, hobbies, volunteering, getting a pet--> allows PNT to reprioritize self/interests
Self-Esteem	Low self-esteem around relationships/partners, (may have high SE in other areas). Inability to see own value/worth
Self-Focus	Taking time/space to focus on personal wellbeing as a priority
Self-Love	Getting back in touch with the self that PNT admires & loves, recognizing strength, resilience & worth. Reprioritizing care away from the INT & back on to the self, improving self-confidence/self-respect, finding self again
SELF VIEW- DURING	How self-view looks once cycle/rollercoaster has taken place for awhile & façade is dropped
SELF VIEW- END	How PNT self-view looks at the end of the relationship. May question own instincts, low self-worth, confidence & esteem, not entitled to own feelings, in debt, confused about what happened/foggy
SELF VIEW- POST	How PNT feels about themselves after the relationship has terminated for the final time and PNT now has some distance from it. Possibly accelerated growth due to events of relationship.

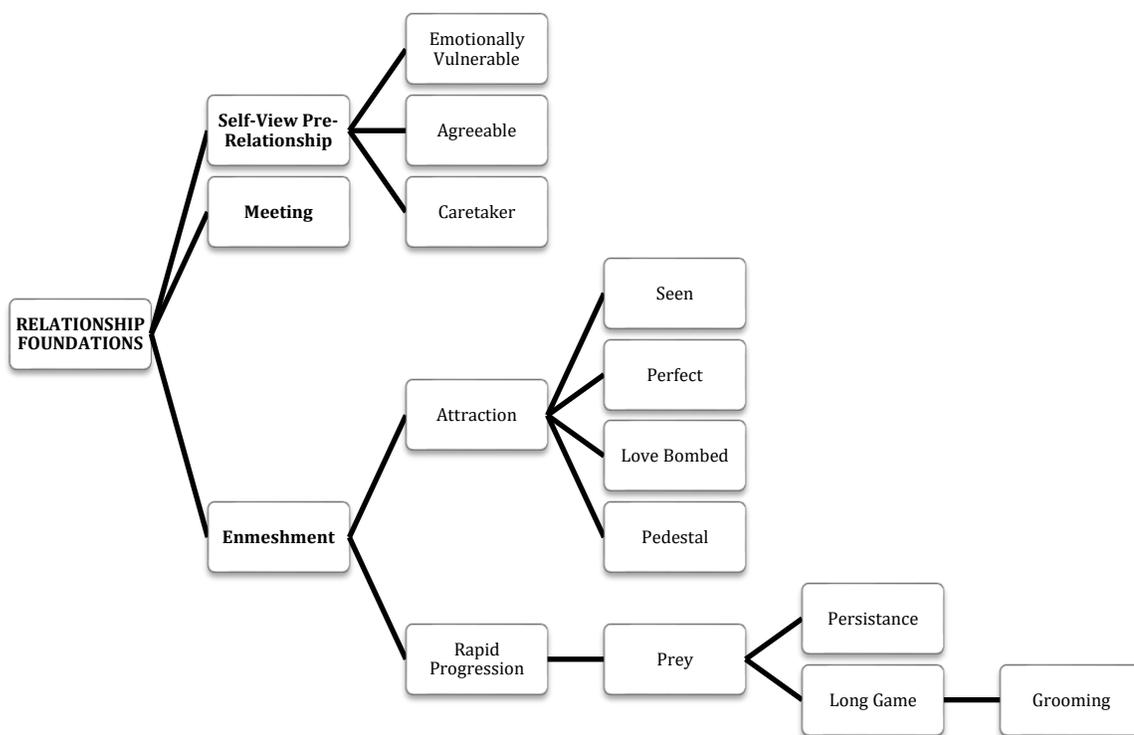
SELF VIEW- PRE	PNT self-view upon entering the relationship. (Researcher observation= PNTs tendency to be humble to the point of deprecation- contrary to achievements in most cases), some- loving life, success or on their way to success, transitory stage, independent. Some suffering low self esteem and/or trauma from FOO or past relationships
Sexual Issues	INT-accused/convicted of sex assault, sex addiction (often self-proclaimed), Madonna/whore complex
Shame/ Humiliation	PNT feeling. Knowing the relationship is not right somehow, but takes on responsibility for that. Can't believe they allow the behaviors/abuse. Less support from people because shame/humiliation prevents PNT from talking about what has been happening
Shifting Boundaries	INT sets stage with subtle hints, pushes boundaries to see how far/much can get away with, gradually may introduce previously uncomfortable ideas/behaviors & use manipulation/anger/withdrawal if there is push back until desired outcome occurs. Use of language & suggestions to normalize demands
Shortened Focus	So much mental energy spent on making sure partner is happy/caretaking moods & whims--> can't see whole picture of relationship. denial/avoidance- push aside instincts. Distracted with other things
Shrinking	Feeling smaller, keeping low profile to avoid notice/conflict/anger- survival technique
Space	Distancing self from INT physically and/or mentally. May be accidental/may include blocking off completely (no contact- so don't go back-avoids temptation to return). Space to reflect. Helps to gain clarity ("clear the fog") & next steps. Time to process, make sense of it (clarity) & heal. Sitting with feelings. Allows feelings of self-efficacy to grow & sense of independence. A sense of freedom, can breathe again
Spiritual Beliefs	Encouraged to marry or for married couples to stay together & make it work. Ex: faith has no language to identify what is happening in the INT-PNT relationship
Strategically Wooped	Often employed when INT realizes they have gone too far/partner pushing away. May be apologies/acknowledgement of treatment (shows

	awareness of effect of behavior on PNT). Doubles down on love bombing & wooing behavior
Strength & Resilience	Refusing to be responsible for INT emotional state. Pushback. PNT can be alone, less self-doubt, trust instincts, not have self-blame be default, allow self to be angry, can be louder, no need to hide. Feeling of growth
Successful Trophy	Often in beginning- PNT= accomplished & successful or on their way to success, sometimes self-assured--> becomes a representation of the INT in public, show status of the INT by having 'got' the PNT, publicly talk up PNT achievements (in contrast to privately)
Support	Support throughout different stages of the relationship & after- family, friends, community. May like or dislike INT & may support PNT accordingly. Truth telling (often post breakup). May be absence of support. Recover/coping: Care & validation from others
Surveilled	Keeping tabs on PNT & activities post-breakup
Therapy	Support via trained professional. Identifying & making sense of the events of the relationship, labelling the psychological abuse & narcissism, learning to get back in touch with feelings & worth/esteem (CBT/Drama Triangle)
Threatened	Covertly & overtly, sometimes implied violence, violence towards pets. Gets worse over time. Often occurs when INT tactics do not work to get what they want
Trapped-Stuck	Feeling that PNT can't get out. Due to INT temper, isolation, \$, fear of reprisal, enmeshment, feeling of helplessness-when contemplating leaving. Realizing that relationship is something different than what was represented at first
Trauma Response	Thoughts or feelings relating to trauma/triggers from relationship (ex: running into ex-->physical reaction)
Triggered Insecurities	INT knows PNT well enough to push sensitive buttons around personal insecurities & will use as tool to diminish
Trusting Instincts	Getting back in touch with self & feelings allows renewed sense of trust in self & gut. Or may be hampered by the events of the relationship

Twisted Blame (Fault)	INT turns around focus conversation they do not have to take responsibility- plays the victim role/PNT always at fault, INT takes no accountability/responsibility. May mirror PNT emotions to devalue or claim for themselves= switch of attention ("victim stole")
Understanding Patterns	Recognizing that INT has a pattern of choosing accomplished or soon to be accomplished people who bring status, intelligence & other competencies to the relationship. Choices of partner are often kind, empathetic, emotionally vulnerable, & agreeable. There is often similar behavior towards other family, friends & intimates- common denominator= INT. Recognizing patterns of behavior & that they are not productive or the norm for relationships
Vindictive Backlash	After separation- INT revenge behaviors. Happens more frequently when PNT does the leaving= when INT feels slighted or challenged. Prevents PNT voice coming through/change wanted by PNT. May use court system or kids against PNT. Often response to perceived rejection. May include harassment
Walking on Eggshells	Unpredictable reactions to control PNT behavior---> confusion/anxiety, trying to tip toe around INT emotional state. INT= volatile mood states (Rug pulled out from under)
Wedges	INT created issues designed to isolate PNT from supports (ex: INT may publicly throw PNT under the bus for INT behavior)
WISDOM	Looking back (hindsight), Learning: knowledge gained through experience. Application of new knowledge. Warnings/advice to others

Appendix D: Code Hierarchy

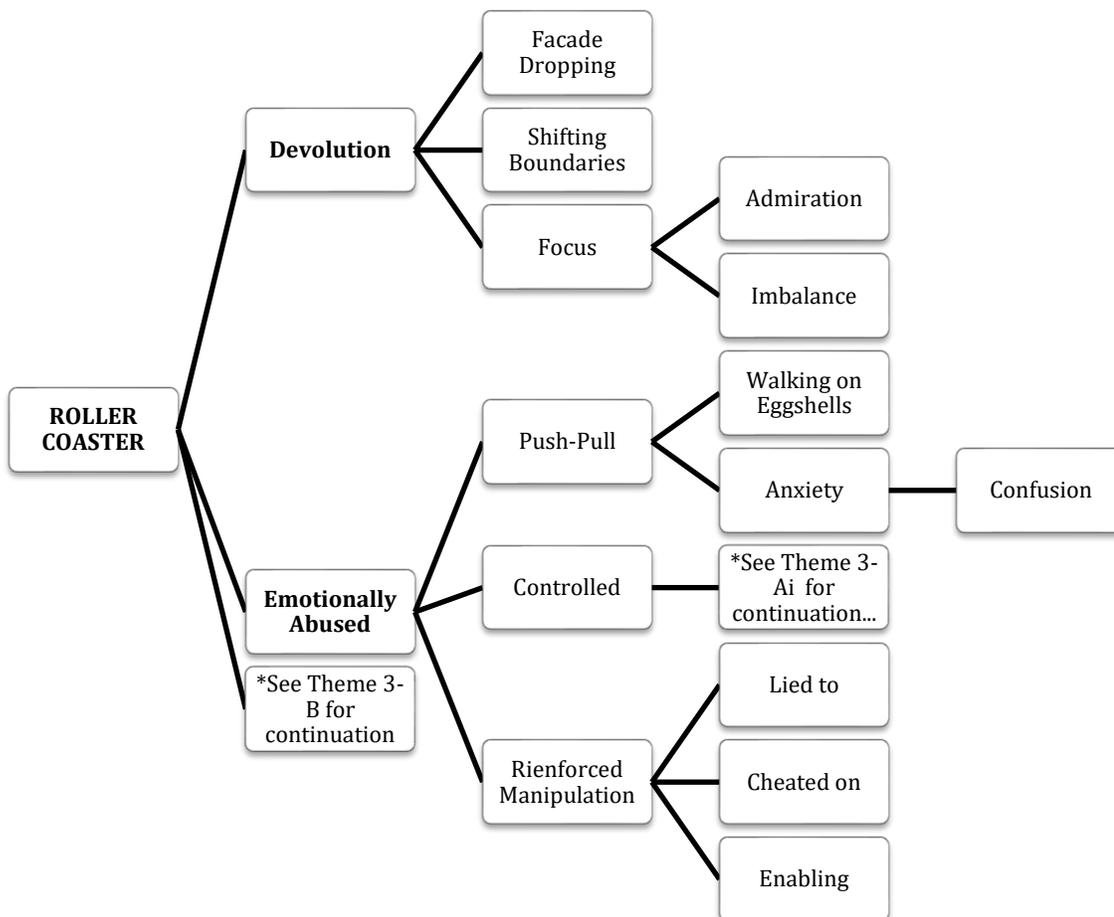
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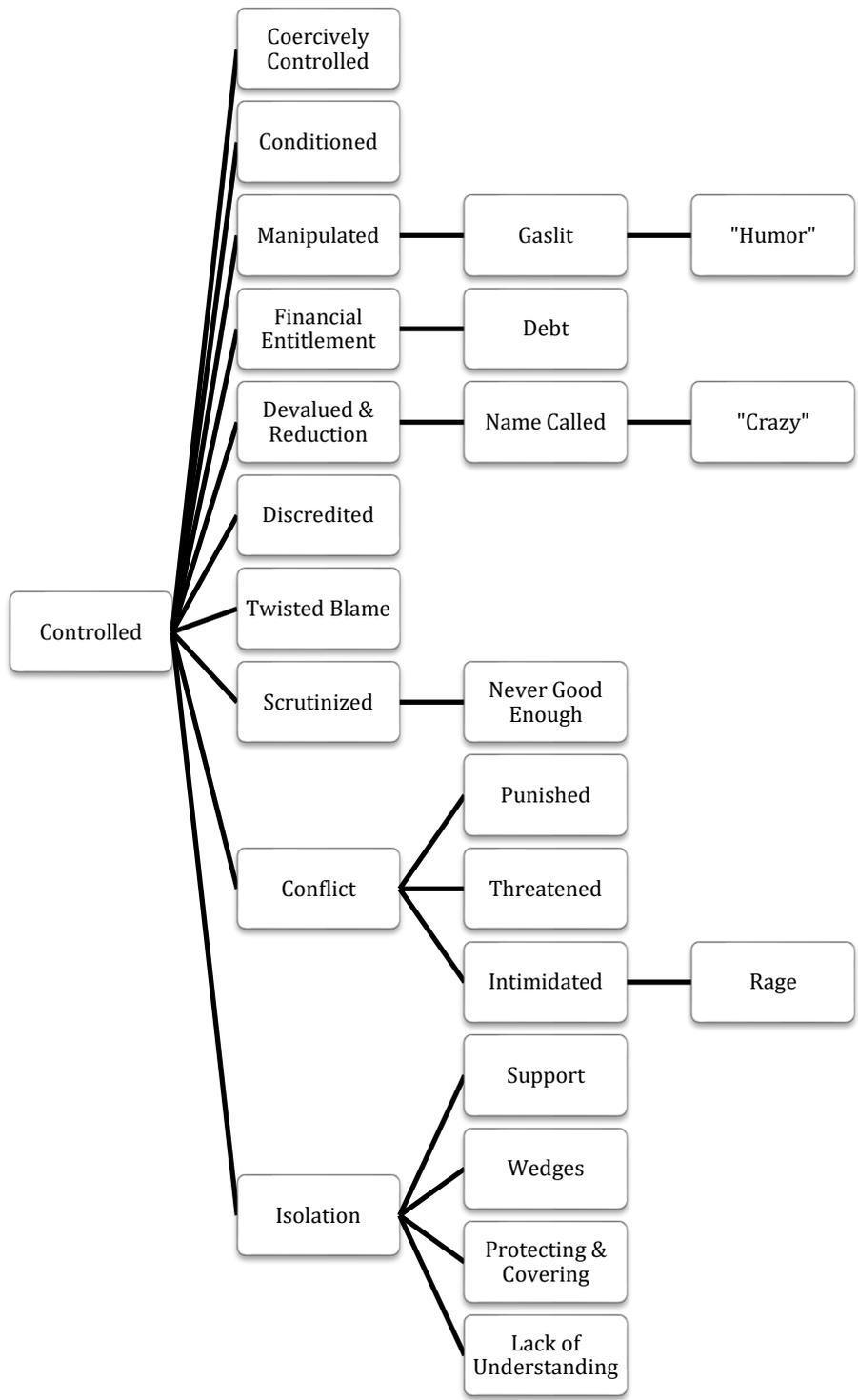
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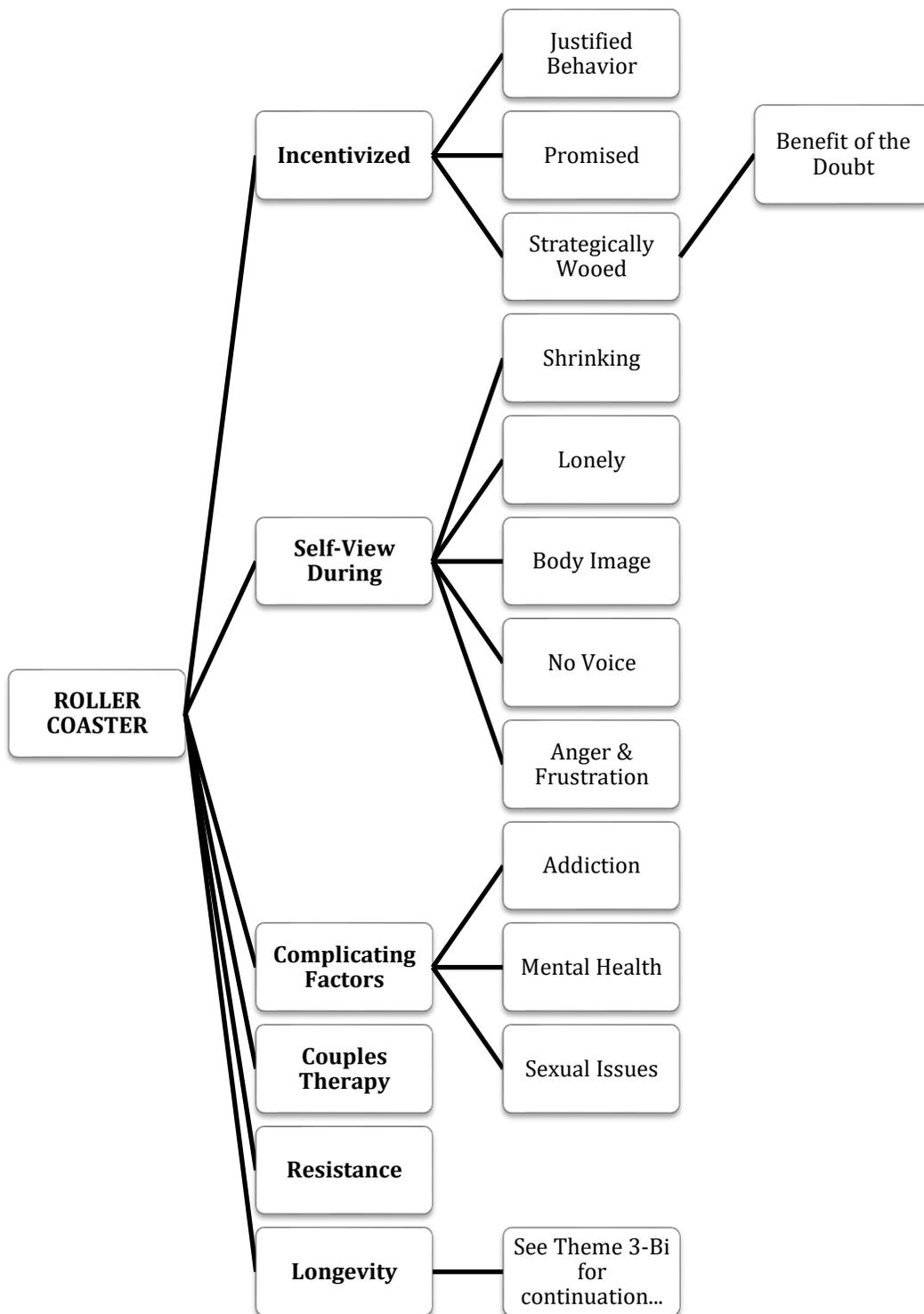
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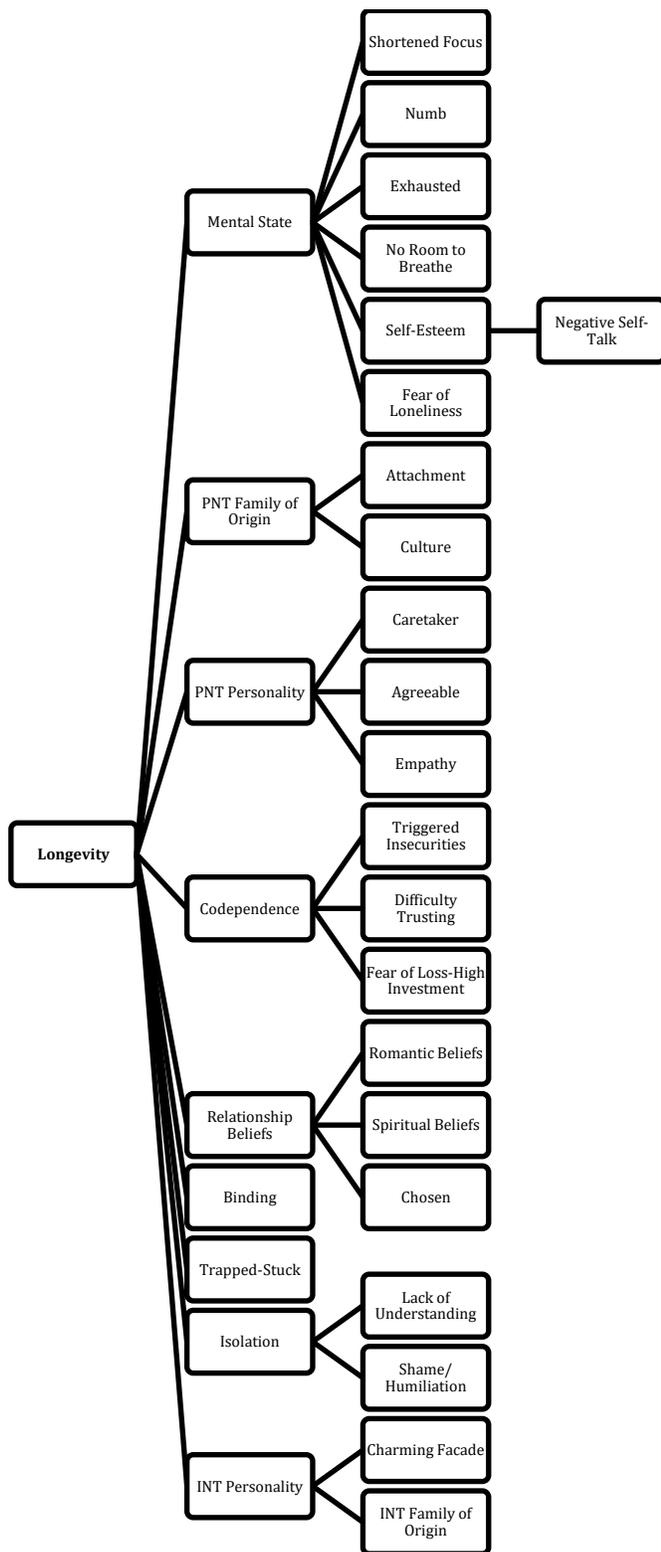
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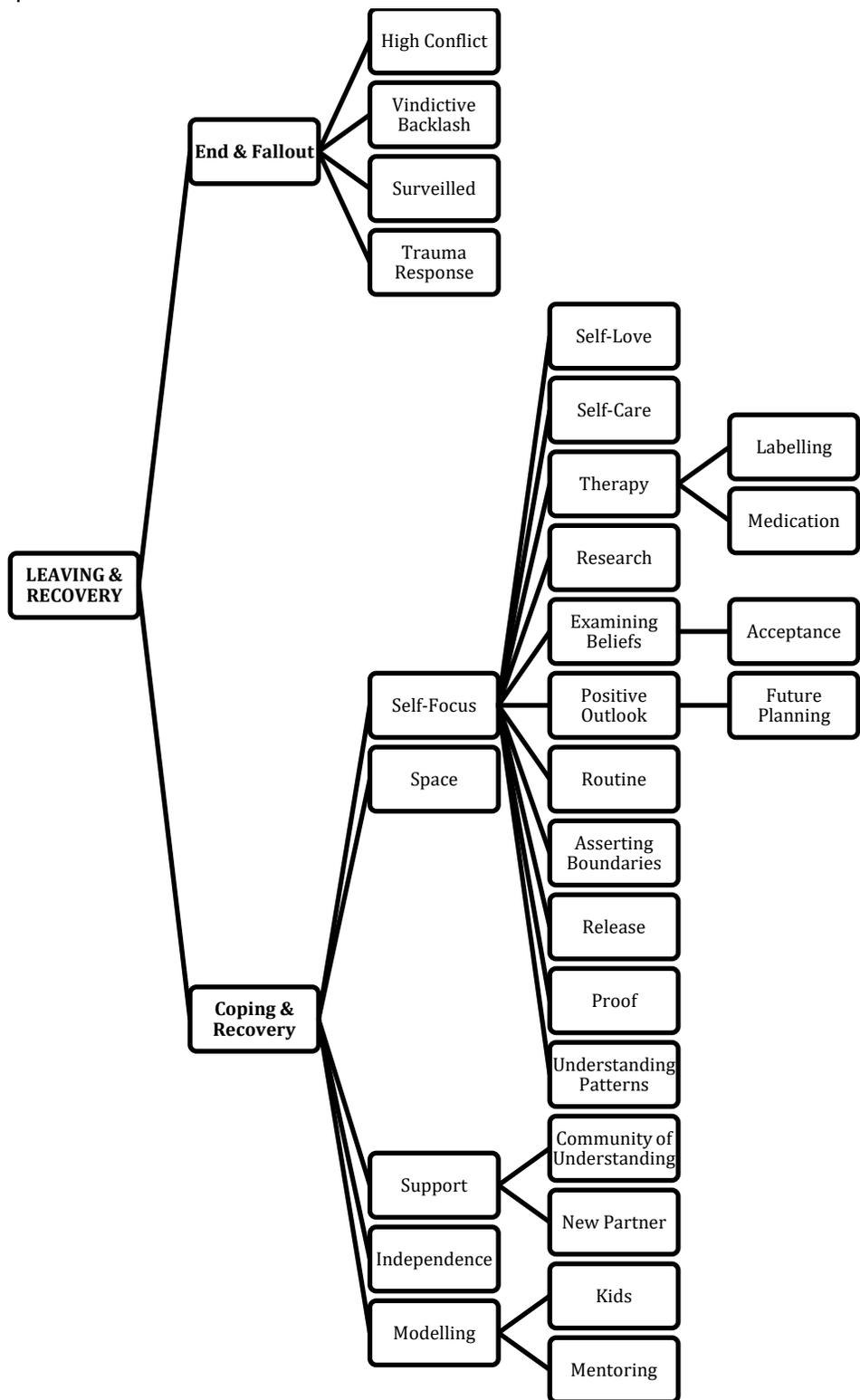
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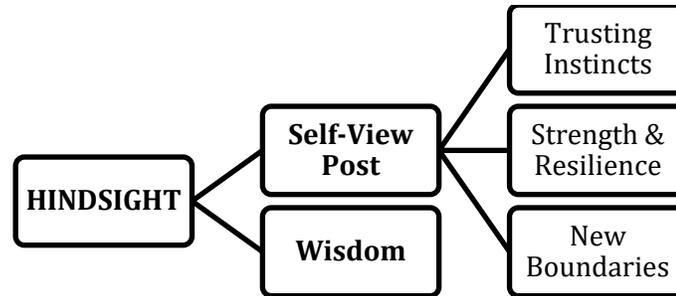
Theme 3-Bi



Theme 4



Theme 5



Appendix E: Elise Addendum

Financial Entitlement

Limits your access to your own bank account or mutual bank accounts

- Uncomfortable with independent CC, bank account and RRSP pressured me to transfer all to joint accounts
- Resentful of nonexistent “hidden” bank accounts and money
- Coerced me into selling my condo prior to our engagement making me prematurely dependent

Lives in your home without working or helping with household

- What I had assumed to be unwitting failure to help with childcare and household was revealed to be control tactic ensuring I was “working” to his satisfaction
- Raged when asked to provide scheduled childcare support then failed to ever reliably drive son to school feigning ignorance of time.
- When he cooked it was to demonstrate how things should be done or favour to me.

Threatens to cut you off financially when you disagree

- Threat of withholding financial transparency always there
- Said, “I would like to see what (your) her life would look like without me.”
- Would say belittling things like, “You don’t understand how finances work.” When I was running our household and had gotten an MBA in 1991.

Prohibit you from working?

- Expected that I would work outside the home but only within hours that didn’t interfere with my household and childcare responsibilities. When I worked at times, he expected me to be available he made his displeasure known by hovering and asking, “Are they paying you for this time?”
- Avoided childcare accountability, framing his participation as a favour to me. Covert until I asked for scheduled help & passivity was revealed to be control tactic
- When I carved out work “after hours” such as teaching fitness classes, he acted as if this was a leisure activity for me.

Sabotage employment opportunities?

- wanted me to work AND expected me to bring in a specific income, but justified no support as the cost of a nanny outweighing income I would bring in
- would hover and question me when I worked during “home” time
- passively avoided domestic responsibilities so I would feel obliged to undertake them esp with respect to child rearing
- conveyed brooding disapproval of volunteer work I was using to keep my resume “active”
- Told marriage counsellor I was fired from my job when I was laid off due to burden of family obligations
- Had negative things to say about all my employers

- Had unrealistic expectations of my income potential - stopped me from taking jobs “below the threshold” that made them worth taking me away from [son] - so I ended up with no work history

Control how money is spent?

- eroded my financial independence so that he became decision maker wrt family spend
- questioned minor expenditures so that I felt the need to be prepared to justify any expenditure
- categorized expenditures he didn’t approve of as excessive and catastrophized their impact on family security
- Created an environment of financial fear but when he elected to spend, suddenly we had enough to do it.
- Would often complain that I behaved as if my money was mine, but his money was ours. The complaint was entirely unsubstantiated but left me with free floating guilt & belittled my opinions
- made up excuses not to see a financial planner
- withheld information about an asset
- tightly controlled tax submission process
- threat to withhold “financial transparency” a constant
- complicated spends he didn’t suggest to a point that they became too hard to execute
- Categorized large family choices as “mine” “my burden on him”, example of my values, not his being prioritized. Until I would suggest a change - his refusal to change would reveal his investment in whatever it was

Force you to work in the family business without pay?

- Categorized my personal expenditures as unjustified while I was supporting his career
- Revealed as actively perpetuating narrative that my domestic activities were of no financial value in our son’s eyes.
- During renovation, put me “in charge of budget” but would never commit to our outside number. This forced me to undertake the load of the project but run all decisions through him.
- Held that my life was a product of his income and would be nothing without him.
- Failed to support me when son started to refuse to listen to me saying things such as, “why should I listen to you? You don’t even have a job!” “What have you done with your life?” & “It’s dad money because you don’t have a job.”

Refuse to pay bills for accounts that are in your name in order to ruin your credit?

- Had me give up my personal credit card because he couldn’t see details of expenditures. Justified this as beneficial to family finances. - now cannot get a personal credit card.

Force you to account for all money you spend by showing receipts? Gives you “allowances” or “budgets” without your input

- As above — denied me a personal credit card because he couldn't see all expenditures in detail - ruined my personal credit.
- Had me add up a year's worth of household food expenditures & deemed the amount excessive. Caused me to redouble cooking and shopping economies and work. Esp. significant when his buying breakfast and lunch at work was never considered impactful on our family food expenditures.
- Accused of hiding money & secret bank accounts made me feel guilty so I was meticulously transparent in my expenditures to counter the false accusations
- Ex would feel insecurity about money. Then blame me. At those times he'd make me account for my spending, ask me to create spending budgets, but would not jointly build a comprehensive household budget. I believe this was because he wanted me accountable to him, but unclear as to our real financial position. This gave him latitude to instill fear in me and question expenditures at his discretion.
- I asked my lawyer whether anything stood out as unusual in his F8 disclosure he replied, "He puts an awful lot into savings." This points to his deciding alone that savings would be our family's priority. It speaks to his reticence to get outside eyes on our financial picture.
- Would boast about security to outsiders but would categorize minor expenditures he deemed unnecessary as sending us into financial ruin.

Withhold money for basic necessities like food, clothing, medication and housing?

- Had me account for all healthcare expenditures
- Categorized healthcare as a luxury spend on my part

Spend money on himself or herself but not allow you to do the same?

- As above for work breakfasts and lunches
- Basement was his woodworking shop — manufactured justification for never converting it to an income generating suite
- When I suggested renting unused parking pad to pay for son's cell phone, he belittled the idea then said he "didn't want to be looking at someone else's vehicle"
- Held minor club membership over my head as security threatening extravagance
- Complained that my visits to family "ate up our vacation dollars" but we never went on vacation even after I would visit only when others bought me a ticket. We never went on a vacation regardless
- Wanted to have one family car when [son] was a baby. He drove it to work. When I finally said I needed it at home & he had to take the bus for a few months, a second car was justified.
- Failed to recognize my doing all gardening, shopping carefully, cooking and other economies that took time, planning and effort as financially beneficial to family
- Created family atmosphere in which our joint decisions were categorized as satiating my desires and sense of entitlement. Only when I suggested we make other choices did his personal investment show itself — he refused to make changes. I.e. son's private school, our house.

- Unfazed when items he wanted went unused, he harped on my and son's purchases ie. \$200 board game no-one played, Magic the Gathering cards, video games
- Ex would use "we can't afford" to justify not wanting to do something. When asked to find an air bnb to alternate weekends out of the house he cited money as his central reason for his not doing so. Finally not "giving in" when the \$ card was played, I asked whether he could do what I was — finding free places to stay. He had many more affordable, free options than I at his disposal, but he lied, saying he had no places he could go. That lie exposed his habitual stonewalling through money & points to the idea that his keeping me uncertain as to our financial security was intentional. It created vulnerability essential to his overall control over me.

The theory that he bottlenecked financial information is supported by his first threat when sensing a loss of control. "I will stop being financially transparent," was his first go-to threat. He saw shared financial information optional and predicated on my doing what he wanted.

Give you presents or pay for things and expect something in return?

- His childcare activities were framed as "doing me a favour"
- joked that I gave bad gifts and then gifted only of items he approved of versus what I or son actually wanted
- made son and I prove out the value of our wants to the point that it was an obvious stress for son when he had to include ex on any buy decision. He knew it would be an exercise in which ex would make the decision cumbersome, impressing HIS desires on the outcome until an item was purchased that fell short of what son wanted but was acceptable to ex.
- An example of this was gift giving: ex gave me several items saying, I know this isn't the one that you wanted but I think its great, better than the one you like etc.

Our Renovation

Our renovation exemplified patterns we engaged in around to finances:

1. My needs always second even when they served our family. I cooked in a 1953 kitchen until our stove blew up. Ex met someone HE thought was the person to do the long-needed Reno at a party and without even interviewing other contractors, the job deemed beyond our budget was suddenly underway. I went along unquestioningly with these decisions because they were my opportunity to get long awaited things done that were important to me.
2. Operating as if finances were problematic until he deemed an expenditure a priority - suddenly we had enough money.
3. Making me responsible for household activity with a spend component but both stopping progress to have me justify my decisions in detail to him as extra step and then acting as if I was responsible for burdening him with the

expenditures. If I spent money on our household, it was MY expenditure - not ours.

4. Without consulting or discussing with me, Ex, in passing told the contractor, "Elise is responsible for the budget." This served to make me worried about my spend, on edge for the moment Ex would call me to the carpet for overspending BUT he wouldn't participate in building a budget we could stick to. With no concrete budget in place, he was final decision maker, I was administrator of his emotions re spend, not an actual budget.
5. Categorizing me as entitled when my priorities were not in line with his. Conveying these expenditures as beyond reason, only after they'd caused months of conflict agreeing that they were the right thing to do. The only issue was that HE didn't see reason for it at the time. My judgement constantly questioned on a variety of mundane aspects of our lives.
6. Ex assigning me responsibility requiring accurate reporting to him but refusing to participate in building concrete budgets that would allow me to freely execute my task. Preferring to have me insecure so I would do more work myself, maintaining veto power.
7. My being made to feel insecure/guilty such that I would undertake time and labour-intensive aspects of our home life without recognition of their financial contribution to our household
8. Ex positioning himself as final decision maker to me and others when he contributed little to forwarding an effort
9. Ex withholding concrete financial information from in order to maintain emotional control
10. Ex belittling my comprehension of finances when he was actually framing his emotions regarding money as irrefutable when he disagreed with something important to me.
11. The tactic of inferring that I was to watch what I spent without a concrete budget led to my doing labour/time intensive work to save as much as I could ie: I personally cleaned our rental to a professional level, our post-construction house cleaning, (despite having a painful medical condition and having undergone surgery), using contacts to get good suppliers, sourcing second-hand appliances
12. I knew we needed a roof over our door to use our BBQ and save the wood of the door. Months of arguing until the contractor suggested we needed it - then we did it.
13. I sourced contractors, appliances, administered leases, payments, oversaw installations, acted as GC, renegotiated our mortgage - Ex never recognized these as financial contributions or "work" on my part.

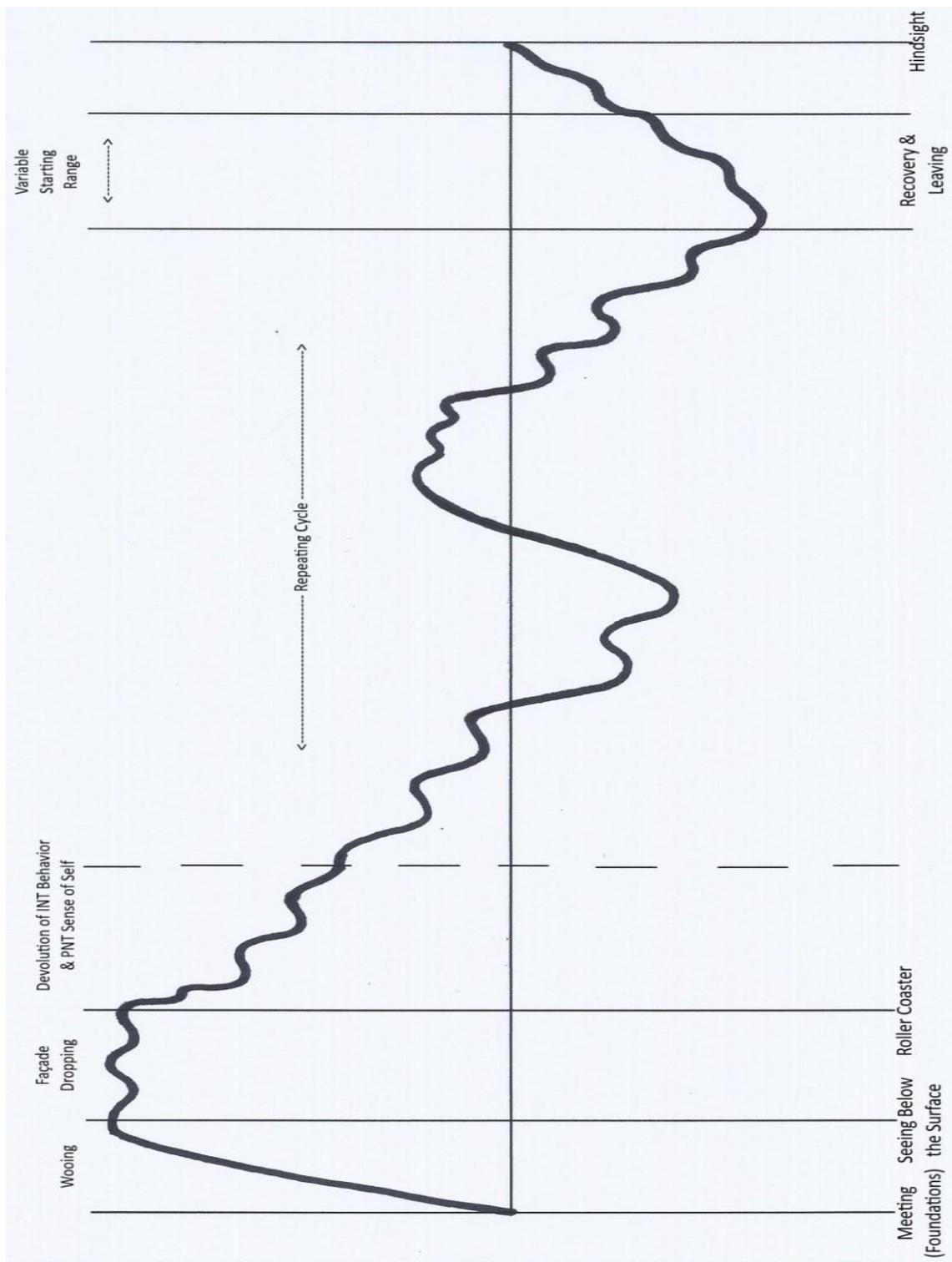
Appendix F: INT Codes

INT	G	BSS	RA	E	ET	LE	A	DM	I	HS	V
1	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
2	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y
3	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
4	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
5	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
6	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
7	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
8	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
9	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y
10	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
11	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
12	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
13	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y
14	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
15	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
16	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
17	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
18	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
19	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
20	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
21	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
22	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
23	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
24	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
25	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
26	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
27	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
28	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
29	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y

G= Grandiosity
 BSS= Believes in Special Status
 RA= Requires Admiration
 E= Entitlement
 ET= Exploitation
 LE= Lacks Empathy
 A= Arrogant (at 1st meeting only)
 DM= Depressed Mood
 I= Insecure
 HS= Hypersensitive
 V= Victimhood (& twists blame)

Note. Exceptions are highlighted in yellow

Appendix G: Trajectory of the PNT Feeling State



Appendix H: End/Fallout Code

Madeleine had finally decided not to hold back her opinions and her intelligence from her partner. Her partner ended up blaming her for their problems and telling her that she has something wrong with her so that he can't be happy with her.

Robin said that her partner ended things suddenly, and he had made the decision, she felt she wasn't safe due to her later rejection of his idea of allowing him back into the home to live with her. Her partner then chose to start insulting her, she felt, to deflect from her rejection. She said that she felt depression and started drinking after the breakup:

When we split, we split because he woke up and he was like "I don't love you" out of the blue at 7 o'clock in the morning. It was so up and down, and I was like "Okay, then get out, because I'm not doing this with you anymore." His thought in that was that he was going to move into our spare room, and I was still going to take care of him and financially support him.

Kyla said that she began to make a plan to leave well before the end happened. She was able to collect some money for her leaving plan and then told the INT that she was leaving. Her ex-partner would make unwelcome advances and couldn't seem to handle the rejection. She ended up needing an emergency order and worried about her partner's behaviour and drinking. Her ex-partner full falsely told the court that she was depressed and crazy in response to her emergency order but the court supported her perspective. Her partner threatened to tell their child she didn't love him which finally prompted her decision to leave.

For Mia the end came because she found out part about her partner's cheating and was able to confirm it. She feared leaving the relationship while her daughter was small and worried about leaving her with her partner because she considered that her partner might try to take her daughter away. As well she had a fear of what else he might take. Her partner attempted to win her back through apologies and good behaviour. She gave him the benefit of the doubt but continued to plan her exit strategy. She decided to end things by creating a situation that there was no coming back from so that she would not get "sucked in" again. She said that they had a long, drawn-out divorce which was extremely hard and required the court because of the heightened conflict. She found that the courts and mediators were ineffective in the situation, however he said that the court system tiptoed around her partner's propensity to "blow-up" and put the onus on her but that the parenting coordinator was not manipulated by her partner.

She described herself as being in "flight" for two months. She said that her partner wanted to keep control of her even after their separation and that he expected certain things of her.

Claire also said that the end of her relationship was messy and ugly. She had been developing an “escape plan” because she realized that she couldn’t stay in the relationship with the heightening conflict. She had thought it was her “duty” as a “good partner” to do all of the things she had been. She realised that she had been like a “frog in hot water” and she had to get out “now” or maybe never at all. As well the contrast to a new friend helped her to recognize the abuse in her relationship.

Megan’s relationship ended abruptly with her partner blaming her and trying to gaslight her into believing that there was something medically wrong with her, while still trying to keep her working for free even after the breakup. She said that she had booked a two-week vacation alone before the end had come and she thinks that what her subconscious intention was in reserving was to try to get away from her partner. He attempted to claim that the breakup was for her benefit. Although the relationship only lasted two years, she thought it seemed more like 10 because of the tumultuous nature of it. She said it ended with a “bang” with her partner telling her to get help for being mentally ill and to lose weight. He wanted her to keep working for his company for free without credit. She said that she stayed in bed in the dark for around a month after the breakup, and didn’t leave her bed, or eat, or eat, or do anything.

Dawn’s partner had locked her out of the house. She said that when he got stressed he started to get “a bit psychotic”. She felt he was not making sense in the last six or eight months, and that he was not safe to be around her or her son. She said that he lied in court about being the primary parent so that he could get custody, and so the end was very scary and stressful due to concerns about her son’s safety. She said that counselling and the court system were getting them nowhere and they were not progressing. Dawn ended up doing the paperwork herself and eventually established a joint custody order later on. She mentioned that it was a relief to have her partner end the relationship instead of her being punished for doing so herself. She had started to make a plan three years into the relationship, but couldn’t manage to formulate a leaving strategy. She had noticed that her partner was spiraling and becoming more “crazy, aggressive, and intimidating” and she said that she would’ve gotten out earlier if she could’ve figured out a safer exit strategy. Dawn said that she finally began to fight back when the court process began because she had suppressed herself for so long.

At the end at the end, Valerie realized that the problems were not all her fault. Her partner’s stories did not add up, which finally led to a confrontation. She realised it was not her fault that she had been mad that her partner had been “sexting” other women. She said it took her awhile to build up the “courage and confidence” to confront him.

Ani started to plan to leave her partner very early on. She said that she realized on their honeymoon that she made “a terrible mistake”. She said it was only about three months into the marriage that she wanted to escape and get out of it and fantasized about doing so. At the end she began realizing that being alone was not harder, she was

carrying a large amount of anger because she was doing everything while watching him do nothing. Once she realised that, she was able to call her partner the next day to ask for a divorce. This was after confirming her partner's dating app accounts. She described that the most vivid thing about her relationship was asking for her divorce. He blamed her for not trying even though she had been working for years for some kind of change. This gave her the realization that he chose not to hear or understand her. She found her confidence in this process. She says that she stopped putting up with "bullshit", and that saying "I want to divorce" allowed for a release and a sudden feeling of "calmness" with the pressure gone. She ended up feeling relief due to her partner's behaviour post-divorce because it was a confirmation of her decision. She said that she felt amazing to have made the right decision.

Ava described how there'd been years of distance in her relationship, not talking to each other, and her partner wouldn't even walk with her. She said that the end was very transactional. Her partner came home and wrote a check to her to end it after she had sent him a three-page letter. She said that there was too much damage for the relationship to work out. She realized that she could not continue after her partner told her that she was "full of shit" when she started talking about her feelings. In the final year of their relationship, she started having "me time" again and her partner didn't like her independence. She elaborated that there was a "messy" divorce and court proceedings. Her partner hid important relationship information and money during the court proceedings. Her act of hiring a lawyer made her partner angry which resulted in threats of violent retaliation. Also, at the end her partner used intimidating body language by pacing, thrusting his fists in the air, and yelling. She felt that the court didn't help much and they ended up having to settle due to finances. She asserted that the parenting schedule was the only positive result of the whole process and that her partner used up all of the court time, preventing her from getting her story across. She felt forced into settlement without being able to present her side due to mounting costs.

Sophia's partner left her while she was pregnant after she called him out on cheating. She believes that that was a strategic choice by her partner to create a fight so that he could justify leaving. She said that the breakup caught her off guard and although he has sent her a few messages after their child was born admitting that he screwed up, it falls on deaf ears because he was lying so much. She mentioned that she needed to find out about his cheating, or she would have continued to blame herself for the relationship problems.

Dustin said that the conflict was increasing towards the end, especially about their child. He is worried about legal and custody proceedings because he is concerned about losing custody. He feels that the main reason that they are headed for divorce is his partner's lack of accountability for her actions.

Jessica articulated that she and her partner were living together for 17 months before the red flags were so clear that she couldn't continue. She said that her partner's behaviour got worse towards the end and that her friends gave her strength to get out. She described the whole relationship as tumultuous, but especially at the end. She asserts that leaving that relationship was the hardest thing that she's ever done in her life to date. They broke up three months before their wedding and she maintains that she was still fairly convinced "two years and nine months into it" that she could make it work. It was only the last two to three months that she started to question what she was trying to do, and just what she was trying to make work. Jessica ultimately got some news that gave a certain amount of unusual closure. She found out that her ex-partner had died, and although she felt some sadness, she also felt relief.

Eleanor mentioned that it took her 15 years to recognize her partner's deliberate manipulation. She said that it was not meeting his imbalance needs that promoted the changes towards the end. She experienced urges to end things in unhealthy ways, such as driving her car into a ditch, however "her intellectual self refused to self-damage over the relationship dysfunction". She had wanted empathy that her partner would not give and stated that if she had not been so completely drained with her back against the wall, she might have tried to work it through, especially if there had been even a little bit of loving behavior or willingness from her partner. At one point her partner left for a work trip and never came home. She said that she had been planning for the end strategically and let him think that he was getting what he wanted. It was painful to her to realize that there had been so much "game playing" in their relationship.

Cecilia revealed that she couldn't take another affair and that that was the reason why her marriage ended. She had been planning to leave and decided to give it four years before leaving so that her son could grow older, however she got pregnant again. She realized that her partner was not changing his ways and felt that she couldn't do it anymore. At the end, victim services and the police had to be involved. She had to represent herself in court because she could not afford a lawyer, which was terrifying and highly stressful. She felt his lawyer saw through him and gave leeway. Cecilia's strategy was to allow him to think that he was winning because as a narcissist he needed to believe that he was coming out on top of the divorce. She said that she was very validated by her court experience and that when she was presenting her case the judge stood up in front of the courtroom and read out every email that he had sent her, the threats, and the demeaning language (which was difficult for her to hear again).

Nancy had also been thinking of leaving long before the relationship was actually over. She admitted that she frequently thought of leaving and that the end didn't happen overnight, but that it became exponentially more apparent that the relationship wasn't going well. She noticed that her partner was spending more time out of town for work, and she was feeling like a single parent because he was never around. At the end she said she didn't even recognize who she was talking to. She had asked for counseling even

though she was considering leaving because she figured that they'd been together for so long that they "needed to fix this". He was the one who walked out, and she said, "ironically, apparently, I could not take enough. You just keep shoveling it at me". Ultimately, her partner text messaged saying that they were getting a divorce and should probably get some lawyers. She said that in that moment she couldn't breathe. He had been lying about a job interview and walked away and didn't look back. She continued on that it was confusing for her kids and seemed hard to recognize that their dad did live with them at some point. He took six months to talk with the kids in the aftermath even though she had been begging for him to do so, which reminded her of being back in the relationship.

Towards the end of the relationship Ruby noticed that her partner was getting more and more short tempered. He told her that he was releasing her from the marriage as a favor to her, although it was "breaking his heart". She found out as well that he had been having an affair with his decades younger hairstylist.

Una said that her partner had decided to end things when they were moving in together but that it actually took six months before breaking up. They had been making plans and then her partner just decided that he was done.

Wendy talked about planning on breaking up after the two-month mark of her relationship but that she had been suppressing her instincts. She admitted that she didn't end the relationship in the way that she would have liked to because she had actually met someone else who she really appreciated and who shone a mirror of contrast on to her partner. She said that when she felt enough confidence to break up with her partner that there was relief in finally ending it. She suggested that her partner ended up really hurt and feeling betrayed, and feeling like he had the high ground. However, friends pointed out that he knew all along what he had been doing and that it was strategic. When he realized that she was leaving he suddenly said all the right things, but too late. He refused to accept the separation and it became very "messy" and inconclusive.

Brooke revealed that when she finally got strong enough to tell her partner that they were done, he acted like it crushed his world. She felt that he became "psycho" and wasn't acting like himself. He did his best to woo her back, saying, "Yes that it was all me, and that he loved me, and he was preparing to leave his family for me and how could I do this?" But then she ended up meeting somebody who is now her husband. She did not tell her new partner at the time because she was scared of her former partner. She also didn't want to share any information with her ex-partner because she worried that he would sabotage her. She had been feeling that she had to stay in that relationship until she felt strong enough to end it, and it took realizing that there were other people out there who were healthier partners. She admits that in all honesty there, was still a bit of longing for her ex-partner and that she wanted a little bit of what she was leaving behind because it was fun and exciting.

Diane's partner broke it off with her by telling her that she was too needy for him. Rita disclosed, "I kicked him out, so to speak, nice and dramatic Christmas Eve 2010. And then it took a year, and a bit to get divorced." She describes the divorce as a misery. The end of her relationship went "horribly". She said that her relationship was in big trouble and that there was confusion with the plan for ending. They would break up and then sleep together and ignore the request for divorce. Later when she was on a road trip with her friend, he ignored all of her texts, emails, and phone calls. She said that 12 days later she got an email saying, "apologies for the delay in responding I was fully engaged in seasonal activities. I hope you're doing better." She said that she was not prepared for that at all and felt that her partner was punishing her for ending things. She asserts that she, "drove the divorce", hired and paid for the lawyer, and that he did nothing. However, after all the paperwork was signed, he kept requesting a collaborative lawyer and her response was, "why? You've lied. You've hid money. You haven't kept to a deadline. Why would I collaborate". My lawyer was like, "holy fuck, you divorced a narcissist." She said that her lawyer was only the second person to hold her partner accountable. She now knows to always have a backup plan and support.

Morgan became concerned about the future of her relationship because her partner was so controlling of her time and wouldn't even let her go to study without involving himself, even though he was the one cheating on her with multiple women. She became concerned about multiple health issues due to massive anxiety. She said that when she actually did start packing to leave and he seemed to realize that he still didn't have it in him to try." It was just like he didn't care." After their breakup, he painted himself as the sad one in the story who had walked out on her, and she feels that people were looking at her as the cheater, likely because of the stories he was telling. "I was just like a gold mine at the time, that over time, that he had used up all that was there. Now, he was ready to just ditch and leave." Things started hitting her after the first month of the breakup and she started thinking, "wait I was wrong. Wait." And said, "so he had me convinced that it wasn't his fault even after the breakup". About two months after the relationship Morgan admitted that she was using a lot of alcohol because the relationship had been so traumatizing that it took her six months after the breakup to even recall the full memory of what had actually happened. She felt hopelessness because of her past and that she felt like she was "going to die". However, she imparted that she feels better at judging people and has gained new wisdom.

Elise suggested that her new independence and sense of self led to the end of the relationship. She indicated that she counted down the years to a specific date when her son was 18. She had been building scaffolding with her psychiatrist to leave, including rebuilding social connections and updating her resume. Finances were the main thing holding her back towards the end. Once she really knew that she was leaving him she recognized him do one of the things that "sucked people in" and she said to herself, "OK that's why". She said that she told her partner that she wanted things to end. He threatened the finances if she left, but she went to try to find another place to stay. She

ended up hiring a lawyer so that she would not get “turned around” and delayed. She decided that she would rather “live under a bridge” than stay any longer with him. She indicated that her ex has been putting their son in the middle and that became clear after she left.

Tara had reached a point where she just couldn't do it anymore. She had come close to leaving in the past as well, however, when she started telling her children one of her sons got so upset that she backed away from her plan. She did end up leaving at one point, but her partner used their “beautiful” heritage home to justify going bankrupt because of the “unexpected expenses” (which she felt was an excuse from her partner) so they had to let go of the home. She said to herself, “that's it. I've got to get away from this.” And they separated and she got her own place, however she went back. She talked about one of the final straws being her partner unethically hiring one of his patients to their office and having an affair with this person. She felt he could not tolerate sharing her name on their door and being as accomplished as him. She recognized that she felt suicidal at that time and almost felt resentful that she had responsibilities because she did not want to be around. She felt that she lost so much at the time of divorce including her connections and the communities that they were part of, her profession, where she lived, and all that she had built there. She felt that she had to keep going for her kids and her animals which have all been a great comfort.

Mona felt that the final moment came due to an “extensive affair” that her partner conducted where in her partner had told his mistress in detail about some traumatic things that had happened to her as a child. She had felt that that was so over the line, but stayed with him, saying to herself, “what does that say about me?” She felt that that was “pathetic”, however, her child was only six weeks old at the time, so she tries to forgive herself for it, although admits it's hard to do so. She did call him on the affair and betrayal, and said that it was a “big blow-up, chaos, drama show”. “Then he would say it was done, and then it wouldn't be done. And that went on for almost a year.” It was at that point that the mistress started to harass her. She said that the ending was “really ugly”. In her plan, she began to prime her partner for the ending of things, and then he did something that she classified as an “extremely bad judgement call in terms of parenting” which was unforgivable to her. She said that her partner texted constantly and couldn't seem to fathom that she wouldn't want him anymore. At that point she felt there was no coming back from this due to the number of times she had been “heartbroken”. She feels she is not recovering or coping just yet because she's too exhausted to get herself back, numb, and that she might be self sabotaging.

Dorian expressed that he was abused but that he doesn't consider himself to be a victim. At the end of his relationship, he went through 42 days of silent treatment followed by his partner asking for a divorce while he was still trying to fix things. He admits that he is glad his partner initiated the divorce, that he felt unlocked, and that it alleviated everything. He had done his grieving before the relationship was over and did

not miss her. His ex tried to take custody away from him and it was a very difficult divorce process.

Vanessa found that when she recovered her old career and started to remember excitement and her sense of self that it led to a lot of fighting. She had been getting a lot of attention for her successes and he started to “disappear”, go out late, and travel a lot for work and then didn’t come home. She had been continually changing herself but had never reached the point of satisfaction for her partner. she had wanted out for three years and had been planning to do so before she got pregnant. She felt blindsided by her partner telling her that he didn't want to be married to her anymore. At one point she had confessed to him that she had been planning on leaving during their relationship and she said he was devastated. “How could I ever think of leaving him? How could I ever...it was just terrible. He was so upset by it.” It turned out the divorce went fast because he had been planning on marrying someone else.

Iris asserts that her relationship ended in a high conflict separation because of her partner’s selfishness in not allowing her to see her father before he passed away and being forced to visit with her partner’s family against her wishes in order to see her children. This was her last straw. She said the divorce was “nasty” and her husband hired a PI to “dig up dirt” to use against her. He stole her tax papers, she felt, so that he could bankrupt her. She had to live with him for six more months because she could not leave without her children. She said she slept with a knife under her pillow. Her ex would not let her take anything from the house and so she kept having to pay to go through the court. She began to self represent because of the costs and “learned a lot about family law”. She spent years in and out of a courtroom in very conflictual situations. Part of the difficulty was that her ex had a very high disposable income and used it to battle her including trying to take away custody of the kids with false stories about his contribution and her lack of it. This included stealing her diaries and doctoring official documents. He ended up being caught out by the court. Iris added that it requires years to collect evidence for this kind of court experience. She said that ultimately, she had eight boxes of documentation. Because she had to learn a lot of family law she had “no life” for the several years it took to deal with the divorce and custody. Developing an appropriate parenting plan that was successful for the kids was difficult and took years because her ex would not take them to activities.