



**HEALING FROM NARCISSISTIC ABUSE**  
SHARMEN KIMBROUGH, MA  
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I grew up working on a 100-acre farm, where I learned to simplify, get to the root, make do and make it work. I carry that mentality to my work here as well – I always waded through the muck to get to the root. While all the psychological labels and terminology are helpful, they name the weed, not the root. Gaslighting, denial, blame shifting, narcissism, flying monkeys, scapegoating... all good words to know. But, what's the real issue here?

It is bad behavior. Period. Bad behavior that destroys the ability to connect, which devastates relationships and obliterates the reflection of God.

I'm going to give you a few tools for breaking free, that are essentially useful to bring health to ANY relationship. These can be modified to help both the person trying to go no-contact, and the person trying to find healthy space while they remain married. (Although I would contend that a period of no-contact is the most helpful most often, because it usually takes a very real sense of loss to catalyze their own internal motivation to change.)

## TOOLBOX

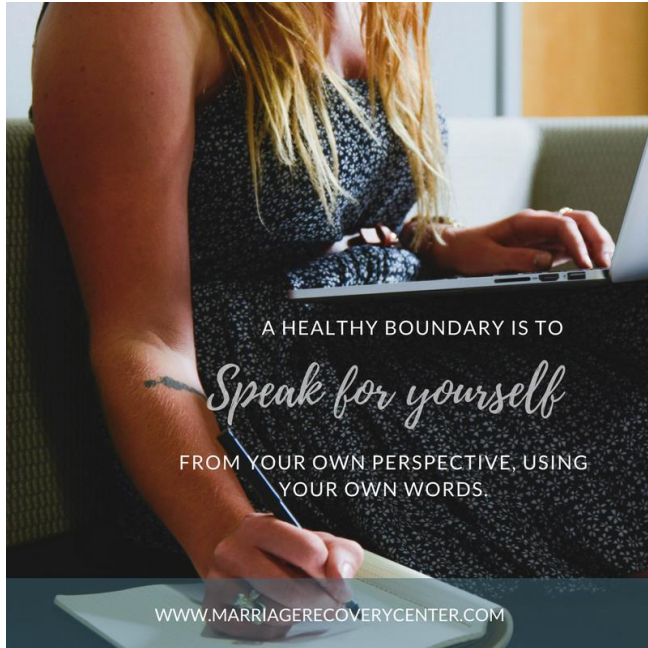
### *Mind Your Own Business*

That probably doesn't mean what you think it means. I wouldn't be telling her to shut up, just live and let live, and disengage in this relationship. I certainly wouldn't say just pray more and let God step in. Instead, it is a way of paying attention to **who is talking about who**. Where the rubber meets the road, and where real change happens, is in taking responsibility for our own selves, and how they talk reflects their assumed level of responsibility.

She comes to sessions saying things like "What can I change to get him to stop?" and he says things like, "How can I make her stop?"

See the difference? In a sense, she knows that change starts with her. She may have codependent thinking about what those changes are, but, she comes to the sessions looking at herself - how depressed, or anxious, or numb, or crazy she feels. She's the one who's done the research, scoured the internet for understanding, read all the books and scheduled the counseling appointments. So even if she's talking about her husband's behavior, it's still in the context of what SHE can do to be better, sexier, meet his demands, make him happy, communicate her needs, listen better, etc.

The emotional abuser, on the other hand, is all about fixing her. You'll hear it in the terms he uses, where he places responsibility, and how he talks about himself. He minimizes his own actions and highlights hers. He talks about HIS feelings but HER behavior. When he does talk about her feelings, it's in the context of his own definition of them – that is, he will tell her what her motives are, how she is thinking, and what she's feeling based on his own perception and not out of an attempt to understand her. An example might be for him say things like, "I didn't (do something he should have), because she didn't want me to." Or, "She thinks I'm \_\_\_\_\_," or "She always tries to make me \_\_\_\_\_." Even using the excuse, "I'll never be good enough for her."



Significant amounts of crazy-making happen in those circular conversations where they evaluate and label the other person's actions, thoughts, and motivation. This immediately puts them on the defensive to the point of not listening or being able to resolve the issues. They both mislabel and misrepresent each other. It's easy for any of us to do! But, it doesn't work to solve anything when the speak for each other. And very often this is used relentlessly for power and control as it leaves the softer-spoken off-kilter and unable to speak. Help her find her own voice by allowing her to speak for herself.

She has a right to say, "I'd like to speak for myself please." Let her use her own words to talk about her experience. When she does this, it begins to break the power of her spouse to define her. It exposes the ways he over-powers with his words. This helps her identify her own thinking and feelings, to put it into words, recognizing she is not who or what he says simply because he says it. This is her, standing up for herself, becoming intentional about giving voice to her own sense-of-self and walking in personal autonomy.

It stops the crazy-making by having each person focus on their own stuff, minding their own business.

If the other person refuses to hear, that's on them. It shows them for who they are, and gives her the information she needs to determine her next steps in this relationship. Then this is where she'll use boundaries to protect herself from being pulled into his toxicity.

## *The Dead Heart Conundrum*

The consequence of behavior that destroys a relationship is that there is no relationship, right? Her heart has been powered-over and broken so much it is dead and numb. There is no relationship. This tool focuses on two elements: Her inability to stand up for herself (to guard her own heart) and dread toward her husband.

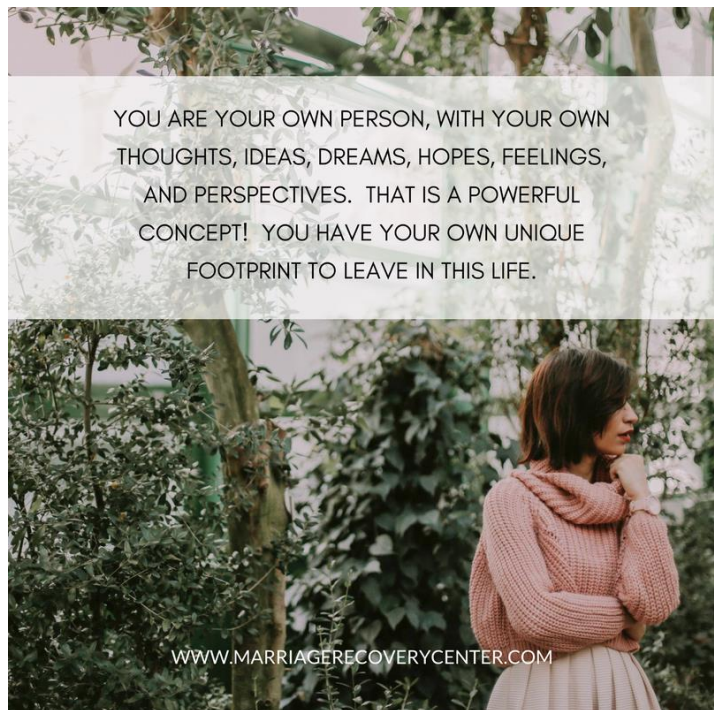
She may have spent so many years having been told -or implied to her - that she's stupid, she is oversensitive, over-reactive, over-emotional, and that nothing about her core personhood is worth listening to or caring about. How she thinks is absurd, irrational, or disrespectful. She's been gaslighted for so long she doesn't trust her own perceptions or memories – which means she has been taught to fiercely ignore her own intuition and gut feelings. Every conversation feels like another expose' on how immature, selfish and unforgiving she is. He's been an expert at hooking her back into the brokenness to heap on more brokenness, all the while blaming her for it and demanding that she fix what he broke.

And then he demands sexual "intimacy," but there is not a bit of it that feels intimate or loving.

Helping bring new life to her heart entails validating her experience, and helping her move through it in order to live well.

She needs to know that her thoughts are her own. Her feelings are her own. Her dreams, desires, hopes, longings, are her own. And they are valuable simply for that.

She needs to hear me say, "That DID hurt." I want her to know I believe her. What she's endured **has** absolutely been devastating, or painful, or frightening, or sinful against her. **She's been managed down to silence.** But her experience has been exactly what she's known it to be for how she's perceived it. It is real. All that mess going on in her heart is real, not imagined, not exaggerated. It is telling her something important. It is whispering hope and longing, grief, and



danger. If she can, learn to listen, and begin to trust her perceptions and thoughts and feelings. Then, learn to let them inform her next steps.

Another element of her lost heart, is that it's normal to have a dead heart toward her spouse! It's normal to be ambivalent about reconciling even IF he changed. Do not allow her to feel guilty for not having "love" for him. That is the very natural consequence for the way he has treated her heart! And it may not be a consequence that God takes away just because he "repents" and "changes." Think of it in terms of the Biblical principle of sowing and reaping: when you sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind. You will reap – later and greater – what you sow.

God CAN restore her heart toward her husband, but that may not happen. It will NOT happen without her husband making very real, lasting behavioral changes that start with heart transformed by God. Even if he does, the consequence of his sin may very well be permanent death of her heart toward him. Which means, ultimately, that both his and her healing depend upon walking this out surrendered to God even as they navigate the consequences. In other words, don't make reconciliation the goal UNTIL you have re-established safety and trustworthiness. Restoration and transformation of their hearts may not end up meaning a reconciled marriage.

A practical assignment I give to help move through this part of healing is to use this simple model as a journaling assignment:

1. *Name what she feels,*
2. *Identify what she's lost through this experience,*
3. *Evaluate how she's been changed, and*
4. *Based upon her future hopes and dreams, identify where to go from here.*

She can use these same steps to move through any of the grief and loss she's feeling as well. Encourage her to take today as it comes, and walk it out as God lays it in front of her. Focus on doing what He puts before her to do today. Keep the issue of her heart before Him, the Master Healer, and let him guide her. Trusting that even in this, He has the outcome under control, for His glory and for her good.

## *Untangle the Trauma Bond*

There comes a point where it is exceeding less frightening to go along with what he says than it is for her to try to fight it or defend against it. She simply doesn't have the wherewithal to defend against his powering-over behavior. Her silence is also tied into her sense of morality if she's been taught that being a Godly woman means being submissive to her husband's authority no matter what it looks like. In other words, she's come to believe she **MUST** keep herself under his "authority" and that going against it is disrespectful and dishonoring toward both him and God, even when his behavior is sin.

She's probably so emotionally dependent upon him to control the relationship, she expects him to alleviate the very harm he uses to control her. Meaning, she believes that he alone holds the power to make everything right, and that if she just sticks in it long enough, they'll get to a good place. Little bits of intermittent rewards (sweet moments, glimpses of good) keep her hooked in the destructiveness in a way that acts like an addiction. The result is that she gives up her power to leave the relationship, and returns again and again to his abuse.

I recommend a season of no-contact, if at all possible. This is the most effective way for her to have the space necessary for her to heal. Her emotional chaos is able to come down to more normal levels, which will then mean she will be able to think more clearly, engage more wisely, and hold to her boundaries more consistently. It also sends the message that she is absolutely serious about not engaging in the relationship as-is. There must be significant change.

No contact means: don't engage in anything beyond logistics. It may mean blocking emails/texts/phone if he disrespects the boundaries she's asked for by using communication to control, manipulate, blame, beg, or love-bomb. Do not respond to any attempt to re-engage in the nonsense. This includes trying to defend, explain, or justify to a man who is intent on arguing rather than understanding her or owning his bad behavior. Teach her self-regulating techniques (meditation, grounding, changing her self-talk, etc.) to manage the state of panic in order to think more clearly and not engage in the crazy-making behavior. If contact must be made, keep it civil, factual, and brief.

Teach her to be a Gray Rock. This is a good word picture to help maintain emotional safety: be as un-shiny, boring, uninteresting as possible in her responses to him without giving anything to grab onto. Be kind and gracious, but stay completely detached from engaging in the power games. Nothing sticks to a Gray Rock, not even Duct Tape! Don't let anything he says land on her heart. More than likely, none of it is truth, and her goal is to live in truth. Let every accusation, sarcastic remark or contempt, and condemnation fall flat. Eliminate the ways she rewards his destructive behavior.



This is not a way to build a relationship! But it IS a way to maintain a boundary of safe space in which to rebuild/regain her core sense of self until he ends his destructive ways. This is hopefully short-term, and will also benefit him as she moves out of the way to let him feel the consequences of his own behavior for himself.

There may come a point, after there has been sufficient space to allow those emotional levels to come down, when it would be conducive to walk the couple through a Therapeutic Healing Process in which the purpose is to resolve some of the mess between them without the pressure of reconciliation.

It is important to note that attachment is something God created! It's normal to be bonded... it takes a great deal of pain to "un-one" what God has "oned." She will need to discern what it is she is "bonded" to... is it the hope of what she thought she saw in him, meaning she's bonded to the hope and the dream? Is it just the good moments she is holding onto? Or is she really looking at the marriage as it really is? Is it a love-based bond, or fear-based? Is she able to recognize abuse, or does she continually subject herself to it, and cannot fathom a way out?

It helps to recognize if this a normal bond or a trauma bond. Because she'll be better prepared to navigate the emotions that ensue. Regardless of what type of bond, she'll experience the effects of withdrawal- loneliness and desire for him (the good parts), desperation for the "drug," or the "fix" that comes with the intermittent rewards. Like any other rehab, she has to fight through the withdrawal to get to healing.

Loneliness may be one of the greatest battles she'll ever face. But, winning that battle is an important part of being healthy, whole, and free.

## *Breaking Bad – False Agreements and Unjust Blame*

Many of my clients start their story by saying, “It has taken me a year (or more) to get the courage to speak up about this. I am so ashamed of letting myself stay in this abuse for so long!” As she describes the hell she's been living in, I keep hearing that theme repeated: I should have seen. I should have stopped it. I should have been better, sexier, more fun, a better housekeeper, more submissive, more respectful... If I had just done it different, I could have figured this out and stopped it.

The thing is, she couldn't have stopped it because he is responsible for his own behavior. Don't imply that she could have done more to appease him. Or that she should have seen the red flags a long time ago. Or should have known better. Or did something to cause this. She already feels overly burdened by shame, and not a day goes by that her spouse is not blaming her.



Don't heap further harm on her. I know she's not here because she speaks in Pink and he speaks in Blue. She's not looking for help because she can't resolve conflict, or there are patterns of unforgiveness, rejection, abandonment, or poor relational habits. While those are certainly a part of her experience, she is here because she is being abused. It's a very different mindset than simply not getting along or knowing how to compromise.

The thing is, it's never okay to power-over another person, to squash and suck the life out of them. Never. It doesn't matter how it's labeled or excused, bad behavior is bad behavior. And her spouse chooses to

mistreat her out of his own free will. She doesn't make him do anything. The blame is not on her.

I know she feels like it is. She does feel the shame of not stopping it. She feels the guilt of her own sinful responses. I'm sure she's embarrassed to tell people what she let herself endure, and the kind of person she's seen herself be in the middle of it. She would never have chosen to settle for this if she had seen it coming!



In actuality, her resilience, loyalty, and longsuffering are incredible strengths. She expected difficulty in marriage! She also expected they'd figure it out and grow through it. She is not to blame for what he has done to her.

Those same character qualities will be the strengths she will draw upon to heal, as well, especially as she sees in greater clarity who she really is and who God is calling her to be. Her story is what it is, scars and pain and all, but shame does not have to keep her from taking a new step.

Help her break the bad out of her heart. By that I mean, get rid of the false agreements and negative, accusatory scripts constantly informing her thinking. Get back to TRUTH. Ultimately, this means grounding herself in what God says of her, and who God is to her, and what her purpose is according to Him.

She has intrinsic value as an individual, unique person with her own thoughts, and feelings and personality. Her husband has acted as if he is God- able to read her mind, know her better than herself, determine what is best for her (essentially the course of her life) and define her dreams and ambitions. I'd even venture to say the church has taught him this is his role.

But, in reality, he has no real power or authority to do so! The only power he has to define her, is the power she gives to him. So, let's teach her to take back her own power by building her core sense of self.

I don't have a name yet for this exercise, but I have my ladies make a list of the character qualities they want to be known for – Essentially identifying who they are. Have her look around at the people she admires and determine what it is that resonates with her so deeply. That's probably a quality she wants to have in her life as well. Some people like to use Galatians 5:22 (The fruit of the Spirit) or 1 Corinthians 13 (The love chapter) as a starting point. This becomes the grid through which she filters her day. Whatever comes across her path that day, she can decide what she'll do next based upon the woman she is working to become. Will her next step move her toward who she wants to be or away from her? This becomes a very intentional way of breaking the old and moving toward the new.

**The biggest hurdle will be overcoming her sense of not even being worth the effort.**

## ***Get Your Spirituality Dirty***

This tool is really for you as the counselor. It is way too common for those of us in a Christian environment to send her the message that being a Godly wife looks like enduring more, praying more, and letting God step in to convict him - meaning since she is not the Holy Spirit, that it is not her job to speak out against the sinful behavior. It is God's job, and her ONLY recourse is to move out of His way by not speaking up, not nagging, and not insisting that he treat her differently.

That is spiritual abuse on the churches' part to perpetuate the idea that being a Godly, submissive woman means taking on whatever abuse our husbands (and churches) have yet to be convicted about. Jesus never once enabled or condoned sin. He never put up with abuse, except when it came time to die for it. But, dying for sin was HIS mission! It is not ours. Our mission is to be a light against the darkness. And marriage is not exempt from the "rules of engagement" the Bible lays out for relationships. God has a vested interest in this marriage being a picture of Himself to the world.

While this relationship IS messy and insidious and sinful, it is the churches' job to shine the light of Christ into it, not to protect themselves from getting into the fray by minimizing the harm or giving churchy platitudes about God's power to fix it or that God hates divorce.

What else does God hate? The bible lists several things!! "There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community." (Proverbs 6:16-19).

***The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion. Ps 11:5***

***"For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing.... (Is 61:8a)***

A lying tongue. Hypocrisy. Arrogance. Stirring up strife. Robbery. Wrongdoing. Violence. What do you think comes first? The divorce or the lying, wrongdoing and stirring up strife?

The question I ask is: How does that behavior/marriage/attitude represent Christ? If marriage is supposed to be the most powerful picture of God, how is that marriage reflecting God? How can you fit coercion and control into the Biblical picture of God's love? You can't! Jesus never exploited his power to control others. What would he think about us exploited Scripture to control others? We have big-time blame shifted by focusing on a wife's level

of submission while avoiding pointing a finger at the husband's abuse for what it really is. True leadership implies walking in such a way people want to follow. Submission is a by-product, not the driving force.

God cares more about the relationship and how it represents him than he does a piece of paper signed by a judge! The whole reason he granted a writ of divorce was because of men's hard hearts that were defying his design for marriage.

A simple, basic, hard-core guide for that husband to lead is to ground himself in the Greatest Commandment: to Love God with his whole self, and Love his neighbor. Wrap his head around what that really means. And then lead with it. There is no entitlement there, nothing that says when he does x he'll get y, or that he's owed y even if he does nothing. The implication is that God's love is completely enough, and that out of that love, he pours out to others. That's a very different picture than what we see -and the church teaches – in the leadership of the home. But, that gives you a good place to start to redeem the time.



## WRAP-UP

An abuse victim does not come to counseling in the same state of mind as someone simply having trouble communicating, holding to boundaries, dealing with stress or depression or loss. There is a whole layer of devaluing, trauma, biochemistry, and brokenness that must be considered. If you don't take into consideration the trauma of abuse, you will more than likely be heaping more harm onto the victim.

A narcissist does not come to counseling in a state of mind that he needs to change anything about himself. He is there for the counselor to fix the relationship, fix his wife, fix anything but him. And while he may appear to agree to make changes, they will be short-lived unless he sees great benefit to himself that doesn't require sacrifice of his power and control.

In summary, if you consider that narcissism is the epitome of our brokenness by sin - pride, arrogance against God, behaving as if we ARE God - then you recognize that we all fall somewhere on the spectrum. The harder our hearts become, the stronger our narcissistic tendencies, and the less changeable they become. God is still bigger than every bit of our brokenness, but he will never force anyone to surrender to him, AND sometimes his stepping in means giving the victim just enough to courage to stand up against the sin. As a shepherd of God's people, no matter what your capacity, those victims need your voice to help them find their voice, and to stand in the gap for their hearts as they fight against being consumed by this brokenness. Is it messy? Absolutely! But it represents a spiritual battle even more so than simply a relational issue. You can't simply treat this as if it's just another normal communication problem, or minimize the victim's trauma because there are no visible broken bones or bruising, or write off the narcissist as untreatable, even.

God has a purpose in every single person he brings into your office, and that is to somehow shine the light of Christ all over that moment. You don't have to have all the answers (who does?), but you do need to let the Holy Spirit speak through you.



*Our prayer for you as you go from here to be a conduit of His ministry to their hearts is this:*

*May you go in the strength of the Power of the Holy Spirit within you, to discern truth and to bring comfort.*

