

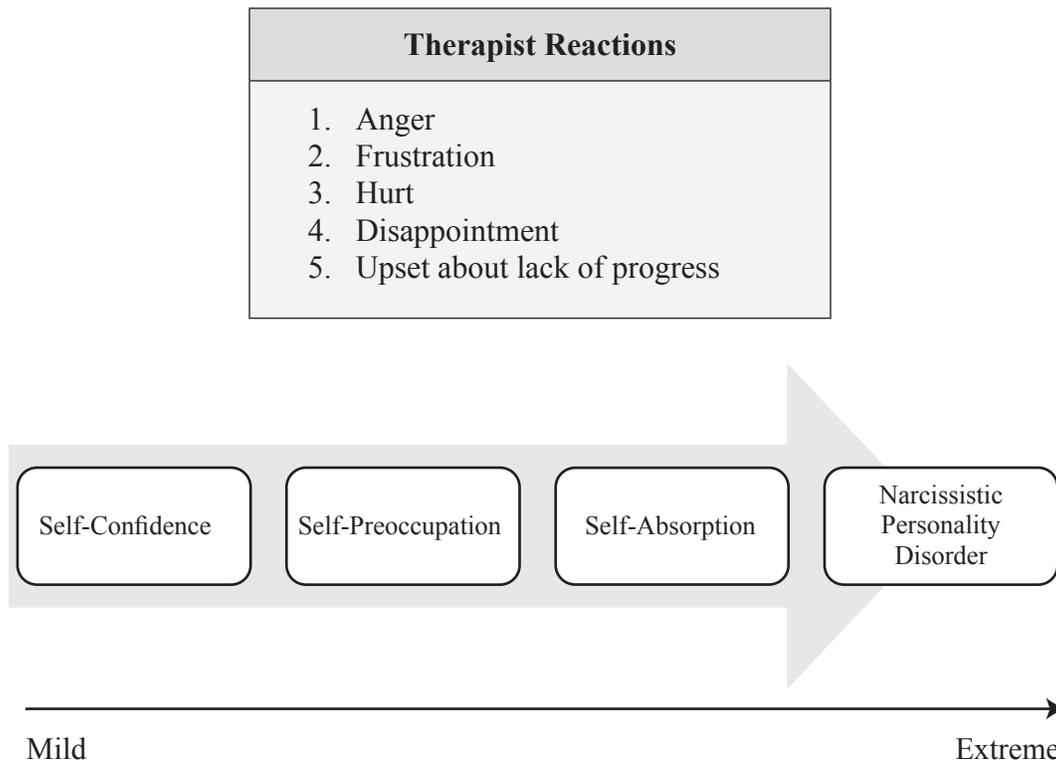
# Surmount the Power Struggle

Power struggles are inherent when working with clients along the narcissistic spectrum. In many cases, the therapist is attempting to get his or her point across about how narcissism alienates others and causes greater problems. Clients develop narcissistic views as protective and adaptive responses, and these can cause the therapist to be pulled into the pathology, which may result in a power struggle. The following exercise is designed to help the therapist gain control of the session and manage content more effectively.

The problem with the power struggle is that the therapist cannot win. If the therapist is able to prove his or her point to be superior, it builds resentment in the client, and he or she pulls back from treatment. Additionally, if the therapist is able to decimate the client's point, this may cause a narcissistic injury that can lead the client to harm self or other. The best way to manage power struggles, aside from not getting pulled into them, is to maintain self-control. By doing this, the therapist keeps the trajectory of treatment on course and focused on client welfare.

Power struggles often bring up transference and counter transference issues. *Transference* can be defined as thoughts, feelings, conflicts, and/or needs that are displaced onto the therapist in a manner that mimics dynamics with important others from the client's life. *Countertransference* is when the therapist's unconscious and defensive reactions are projected onto the client; this causes a visceral reaction in most therapists. This reaction is part of what causes therapists to be pulled into power struggles.

Below are the five most common therapist reactions when working with an individual along the narcissistic spectrum that cause power struggles to occur. The intensity tends to be correlated with how far along the client is on the spectrum.



The most important thing to remember is:

**Countertransference reactions are normal and expected**

Managing the session includes managing your own actions and reactions. You want to self-monitor your feelings, the dialogue between you and the narcissistic spectrum client, and your body language and facial expressions. You may not play poker with cards, but you are playing it in therapy with these types of clients.

Below are eight options for you to try when you are pulled into a power struggle. Some may fit with your therapeutic modality; some may not. Use the ones that fit and perhaps try one or two that do not to expand your session management skills. Each of these skills can be practiced while in session or outside of it.

- **Avoid “Us and Them” Thinking:** This entails thinking that the client is so different from you and your other clients that he or she is impossible to work with. Your client is now in the outgroup, and whether consciously or unconsciously, he or she will be treated as such. Try and consider what factors you and your client have in common. You have an advanced degree and you worked hard to get where you are in life. Has your client worked hard? Is he or she driven to achieve like you but afraid of failure? What is the common ground? This is not easy, but it is an invaluable exercise.
- **Manage Your Emotions:** Your expertise is in emotional control and management, but that does not mean that you cannot be pulled into an interaction in which you lose sight of these skills. You are working with someone who has had a lifetime of using skills to manage interpersonal relationships by throwing people off balance with his or her own emotions. Slow down, take notice of your emotions, and ask yourself, “Has [client name] hit a personal trigger?” This is when knowing your own personal issues is critical. If you do not know your own triggers, your client on the narcissistic spectrum (as well as your other clients with personality disorders) does, and he or she will use that to tip the interaction in his or her favor. This is not malicious, but adaptive for the client. It is how he or she survives. If he or she has hit a trigger, now is the time to use the pull out or concrete skill discussed later in this section and explore this issue after session in supervision with a trusted colleague or enter therapy yourself to learn about the issue and control it. Read the skill “Know Your Triggers.”
- **Self-Monitor:** When working with complex clients, like those along the narcissistic spectrum, having a solid skill like self-monitoring is invaluable. The foundation of successful self-monitoring is being aware of your emotions and behaviors. Easy, right? Not if you are in the middle of a power struggle. Try the following steps:
  1. The target is to reach a sense of calm and clear focus.
  2. What evidence is present to indicate your current emotions and behavioral reactions? (e.g., clenched teeth, making a fist, leaning forward, flushed face, increase in respiration and heart rate).
  3. Ask yourself, “When I get/do [insert emotions/behavior], do I become \_\_\_ (e.g., closed minded, aggressive, withdrawn, argumentative)?”

4. Get control of your breathing; focus on that while your client is engaged in the power struggle. (He or she will not notice, as he or she is enthralled in the power struggle.)
  5. Mentally reorient yourself to the discussion and issue.
  6. Re-engage with a sense of calm and clear focus.
- **Know Your Triggers:** It is imperative that you know your personal triggers if you are going to work with clients who have personality disorders. Such clients build up the skill to read others. Some use it for manipulation and some, for self-protection, but all of them have this skill to varying degrees. Your clients on the narcissistic spectrum are not exempt. Your triggers are excellent ways to pull you into power struggles, throw you off balance, and cause you to engage in behaviors or say things you would not normally do or say. In these instances, your client is likely to use this against you to show his or her superiority and your incompetence (in his or her opinion). Triggers typically come from your past life experiences. For example, you may have a picture in your office from a marathon in which you ran in your hometown. You are proud of this, and you came in third. Your narcissistic client is likely to mention how good it is that you ran the marathon, but too bad you could not win and “just came in third.” Your reaction, if this is a trigger, tells your client volumes about you. Pictures in your office, the signature in your email, your website content and design are all indicators of personal information and values and can be potential triggers. Can you answer the following question?

My triggers are \_\_\_\_\_

If you are having trouble identifying them, seek supervision or consultation or participate in therapy to explore it. The benefits of knowing your triggers are invaluable, but the consequences of not knowing them can be detrimental.

- **Disengage:** This is a simple technique to gain control of the power struggle. This entails mentally extracting yourself from the power struggle and making a general probe or reflection. For example, “This really seems to upset you,” or “You have very strong feelings about this.” It is hard to continue the power struggle if you take the gas out of the tank.
- **Assess Gain:** Power struggles are typically an exercise for control. All therapists know that there are many dynamics at play when conducting therapy, especially with the client on the narcissistic spectrum. In my experience, I have never gained anything by either “winning” or “losing” a power struggle, but I have spoken to therapists who hold the idea that if they can win, this will “teach the client a lesson.” I would be cautious in subscribing to this belief and would want to be certain that what you gain is both a long-term and a short-term benefit to the client. I have seen this belief as a form of countertransference and not an ingredient of lessening narcissistic expression. It is always a good idea to consult with a colleague or supervisor to objectively examine whether there is anything to gain from “winning” or “losing” a power struggle.
- **Pull Out:** Sometimes power struggles become so heated and extreme that the best option is to pull out. Therapeutic pull out entails recognition that the session has reached a point of impasse, emotions are too extreme, objectivity is compromised by both parties (therapist and client), and the session needs to end. However, you do not want to end the session with bitter anger or other intense emotions, which builds resentment. First, recognize that you and your client are at an impasse, objectively identify emotions in you and your client as you see them, utilize “I” messages to convey your feelings (relaxation techniques may also be good here), and generate a possible solution, noting that ending today’s session is a viable option

on which you both should agree. I would assign out-of-session exercises (I do not like the word *homework*) to allow your client to fully process what occurred in session. Try to end in agreement or postponement of the issue. **It is important that your client does not feel wounded, hurt, or further angered due to you demonstrating your power by ending the session.**

- **Be Concrete:** Many times a power struggle is over what could, would, or should happen. In these cases, the power struggle ends up going off course and you get caught up in hyperbole with little or no resolution. The key to deescalating it is to focus on concrete facts about the basis of the power struggle. But you must first remove yourself from the power struggle and reach an objective state. The other skills in this section can help you reach that point. Then, it is important to stay with the issue and make sure it is one issue. A single clearly defined problem is easier to contend with than three or four vague ones. Make sure you stay concrete and focused on one issue that is in the here and now. This could be what is going on in the session, how the client feels about you, or something else that has come up. Examine the single issue from an objective standpoint, break it down, and discuss viable options, noting that some issues have no resolution. Clients on the narcissistic spectrum have difficulty being concrete due to having a rich fantasy life and lessened ego resources. Teaching them the skills of being concrete and examining singular problems is valuable but notably difficult for this type of client.

Taken from the *Antisocial, Borderline, Narcissistic, and Histrionic Workbook* by Daniel J. Fox (2015)