



The Unexpected Negative: a Narcissistic Partner

2015

16 min read • 3,618 words

Themes: Consciousness Technology Mental Health Programming Human Centered Spiritual



Both my [essays](#) and general outlook on life are typically quite positive and idealistic. This attitude has served me very well over the years in [software development](#), [open source community building](#), and [human-centered design](#). However, if you take a look at my [core ideals and values](#), you'll see one very important line item that I've been forced to revisit lately:

Positivity. Negative atmospheres are toxic. Remove yourself from them.

Normally, for me, this means to remove my negative perception about a given situation. Sometimes, it means to give myself space from a political environment or project which is having a toxic effect on me. But, I've been reminded lately, through a very painful experience, that negativity can take many ugly forms, including that of other people.

The past year of my life has been an absolute rollercoaster of emotion — the highest of highs mixed with the lowest of lows. This newfound source of profound inspiration came to me in the form of a new relationship

The intensity of emotions in abusive relationships creates what psychologists call "trauma bonding"—intermittent reinforcement that makes the highs feel profound precisely because they contrast with systematic emotional destabilization.

. This emotional volatility occurred during the same period as my growing interest in [eastern philosophy and spiritual practices](#), creating a perfect storm that would later contribute to [a major mental health crisis](#).

No amount of optimism can change the fact that sometimes, people will take advantage of you, in very unexpected and sinister ways. In my case, I developed a very close romantic relationship with an emotionally manipulative and [histrionicnarcissist](#)

Cluster B personality disorders (narcissistic, histrionic, borderline, antisocial) often involve patterns of emotional manipulation and unstable relationships. Understanding these clinical frameworks helps recognize systematic rather than personal failures.

Helping You Help Yourself (or hopefully not...)

Sharing accounts of this nature is a difficult thing to do — there's a heart-warming sense of vulnerability mixed with a chilling sense of shame. But, experiences like these are where all the realness of life gets played out. The only experience is direct experience

This philosophy—that understanding comes through lived experience rather than abstract knowledge—runs throughout Kenneth's work, from API design to consciousness research. Sometimes the most painful experiences teach the most valuable lessons.

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I am writing this article because reading someone else's story woke me up to the fact that I was in an emotionally abusive relationship — perhaps it will help you too

Pattern recognition—seeing the systematic nature of what feels like personal failure—is crucial for recovery. When you realize your experience matches documented patterns, the shame transforms into understanding.

. This experience with manipulation and emotional abuse later informed understanding of [how systems can systematically exploit psychological vulnerabilities](#), whether in personal relationships or through technology platforms

The same psychological mechanisms that enable individual manipulation—intermittent reinforcement, reality distortion, isolation—are employed by algorithmic systems at massive scale. Understanding personal abuse patterns helps recognize technological exploitation.

. The pattern recognition skills developed through [software engineering](#) and [API design](#) eventually helped me analyze not just code but psychological and social systems, recognizing how [algorithmic optimization systematically undermines human virtue](#) through the same mechanisms that enabled this personal abuse.

Emotional (e.g. spiritual) abuse is often overlooked, considered less harmful than physical or sexual abuse — but research shows that nothing could be farther from the truth

Brain imaging studies show that emotional abuse causes measurable changes in brain structure and function, particularly in areas involved in self-regulation and reality processing. The damage is literal, not just metaphorical.

. Emotional abuse can leave a very successful, kind, and confident person feeling crazy, emotionally unstable, and out of control

High-achieving, empathetic people are often prime targets for narcissistic abuse precisely because their competence makes them valuable resources while their empathy makes them vulnerable to manipulation.

. Before you know what has happened, you have lost your well-established sense of self-respect, confidence, pride, and trust-worthiness. The abuser considers your most admirable traits, like vulnerability and empathy, as weaknesses and exploits them to achieve their self-serving goals. Over time, if you stay with the abuser, you start to doubt the very foundations of what make you you.

The Pattern Recognition

What made this experience particularly insidious was how gradually it unfolded. Narcissistic abuse isn't like a sudden attack—it's a slow erosion of your reality, engineered to make you dependent on the abuser for your sense of self-worth and truth.

The pattern became clear in retrospect:

Love Bombing: An overwhelming rush of attention, affection, and promises. She made me feel like I was unlike anyone she'd ever met, that our connection was cosmic and meant to be. The intensity felt profound and romantic rather than manipulative

Love bombing exploits the human need for validation and connection. The excessive attention feels like recognition of your specialness, but it's actually a calculated strategy to create emotional dependence and bypass normal relationship boundaries.

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Isolation: Gradual disconnection from friends, family, and support systems. She would suggest that others didn't understand our connection or weren't good for me, creating a bubble where only her perspective seemed valid

Isolation serves multiple purposes: it eliminates outside reality checks that might reveal the manipulation, creates complete dependency on the abuser for social connection, and removes potential sources of support during crisis moments.

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Gaslighting: Systematic distortion of reality. Conversations I remembered clearly, she would reframe as "never happening" or meaning something completely different. I began to question my own memory and perception

Gaslighting is named after the 1944 film where a husband manipulates his wife into believing she's losing her sanity. It's perhaps the most insidious form of psychological abuse because it attacks the very foundation of your ability to trust your own experience of reality.

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Emotional Volatility: Unpredictable cycles of intense affection followed by cold withdrawal or criticism. Walking on eggshells became my default mode, always trying to figure out what might trigger the next mood shift

This unpredictability serves to keep victims in a constant state of hypervigilance and anxiety. You become so focused on managing their emotions that you lose touch with your own needs and boundaries.

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Trauma Bonding: The combination of intermittent reinforcement and emotional intensity created an addictive dynamic. The highs felt so high precisely because the lows were so destabilizing

Intermittent reinforcement is the most powerful conditioning schedule for creating addiction. Variable rewards (sometimes kindness, sometimes cruelty) create stronger psychological bonds than consistent positive treatment ever could.

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The Technical Mind vs. Emotional Manipulation

One thing that made this particularly challenging was how my analytical, problem-solving mindset actually worked against me. I kept trying to "debug" the relationship, to find the logical pattern that would make everything work smoothly

Programmers are particularly vulnerable to emotional manipulation because we're trained to solve problems through analysis and iteration. This mindset can trap us in abusive dynamics that we approach as systems to be optimized rather than relationships to be escaped.

. This same analytical approach that had served me well in [creating intuitive APIs](#) and [building collaborative communities](#) became a liability when applied to fundamentally exploitative dynamics. The "[for humans](#)" philosophy that guided my technical work assumed good faith—a catastrophic assumption in manipulative relationships.

She exploited this tendency perfectly. She presented her emotional volatility as puzzles to be solved, making me feel like if I could just understand her better, communicate more clearly, or love her more completely, everything would stabilize

This creates a sense of false agency—the illusion that you have control over the relationship's stability through your own behavior. It's a particularly cruel manipulation because it makes you feel responsible for both the problems and the solutions.

. Years later, I recognized the same false agency in [algorithmic systems](#) that present social problems as individual optimization challenges—making users feel responsible for engagement metrics, relationship success, or mental health outcomes that are actually systemically determined by platform design choices.

But the instability is the point. It keeps you off-balance, always trying to regain that initial perfect connection, never realizing that the perfect connection was itself a carefully constructed illusion.

The Unraveling

The relationship began to deteriorate as my mental health challenges emerged. Instead of support during my most vulnerable period, I experienced abandonment and gaslighting when I most needed stability and understanding.

When I received my mental health diagnosis, she dismissed it entirely, insisting I was just more sensitive to the moon and that my psychological struggles were spiritual rather than medical

Medical gaslighting—dismissing or reframing someone's legitimate health conditions—is a particularly dangerous form of manipulation that can prevent people from getting necessary treatment and support.

. She used lunar mysticism to dismiss my legitimate psychological condition. This mystical reframing of my documented mental health condition was perhaps the most insidious form of gaslighting I experienced.

This medical gaslighting would later inform my understanding of how [institutional systems can systematically dismiss lived experience](#) while maintaining plausible deniability. The same reality distortion that characterized this personal relationship appears in [community exclusion patterns](#) and [algorithmic discrimination](#)—systems that claim to support mental health while systematically marginalizing those who disclose psychological struggles.

It became clear that my value in the relationship was tied to what I could provide—affection, admiration, validation, sex, and money—rather than who I was as a person. When mental health challenges made me less able to serve these functions, her interest waned dramatically.

The end came suddenly but tellingly. Despite everything, I still believed in the relationship enough to propose marriage again. Her response was brutally clear: "Kenneth, that's never going to happen."

That statement stripped away all the manipulation, all the cosmic connection rhetoric, all the gaslighting about my mental health—and revealed exactly what the relationship was from her perspective: a source of resources with no intention of genuine partnership

What's particularly cruel about narcissistic relationships is how moments of brutal honesty often come after the deepest manipulation. The truth emerges not as kindness, but as casual dismissal of something you hold sacred.

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What made this especially revealing was her willingness to continue the relationship on these terms. The narcissistic calculus laid bare: "I'll keep taking what I need from you, but I won't give you what you need from me." This wasn't a rejection of me personally—it was an explicit acknowledgment that she saw me as a resource rather than a partner

The distinction between being seen as a resource versus a partner is fundamental. Partners are valued for their inherent worth; resources are valued for what they can provide. This difference shapes every aspect of how you're treated in the relationship.

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In a twisted way, that moment of brutal honesty was a gift. It cut through years of manipulation and gave me clear information to act on. No more wondering, no more trying to debug the relationship, no more false hope. Just the truth about what I actually meant to someone I thought I might spend my life with.

I walked away that day

Walking away from someone you love who's offering to keep using you requires recognizing that what you thought was love was actually exploitation. That moment probably saved years of additional psychological damage.

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Recognition and Recovery

The breakthrough came through reading other people's accounts of similar experiences. The patterns were so consistent across different relationships and different contexts that it became impossible to deny what was happening.

Key realizations:

You Cannot Fix Them: No amount of love, patience, or understanding will change someone who fundamentally views relationships as power dynamics rather than mutual support systems

The belief that love can heal anyone is a beautiful ideal that becomes a dangerous trap in narcissistic relationships. Your capacity for love becomes the hook that keeps you engaged in fundamentally unwinnable dynamics.

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The Good Times Were Part of the Manipulation: The intense highs weren't glimpses of their "true self"—they were calculated behaviors designed to maintain your emotional investment

Variable ratio reinforcement schedules create the strongest psychological bonds. The unpredictability of kindness makes it more powerful than consistent love ever could be—a principle casinos exploit and narcissists instinctively understand.

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Your Instincts Were Correct: All those moments when something felt "off" but you dismissed your feelings in favor of their explanation were your psyche trying to protect you

Gut instincts often process patterns faster than conscious analysis. Learning to trust these early warning signals becomes crucial for preventing future manipulation, whether in relationships or business contexts.

The Damage is Real: The psychological effects of systematic gaslighting and emotional manipulation take time to heal, even after you recognize what happened

Recovery from narcissistic abuse typically takes 2-5 years of active work. The timeline reflects how deeply these relationships rewire your neural patterns around trust, reality-testing, and self-worth.

Lessons Learned

This experience taught me crucial lessons that extended far beyond romantic relationships:

Trust Your Gut: When something consistently feels wrong despite logical explanations, pay attention to that feeling. Your subconscious often recognizes patterns before your rational mind can articulate them

The body keeps score of emotional safety in ways the conscious mind misses. That knot in your stomach or tension in your shoulders often contains more accurate information about relationship dynamics than rational analysis.

Healthy Relationships Don't Require Constant Vigilance: If you're perpetually walking on eggshells or trying to prevent your partner's next emotional explosion, you're not in a relationship—you're in a hostage situation

Chronic hypervigilance rewires your nervous system for survival rather than connection. Recovery involves learning to recognize what psychological safety actually feels like—often surprisingly calm and boring compared to trauma-bonded intensity.

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Vulnerability is Not Weakness: The fact that someone can exploit your openness and empathy doesn't mean you should become closed off. It means you need better boundaries and pattern recognition

Healthy vulnerability requires discernment—sharing your authentic self with people who have demonstrated genuine care and reliability rather than with anyone who demands emotional access.

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Manipulation Follows Predictable Patterns: Understanding these patterns helps you recognize them early, whether in personal relationships, business situations, or even technology platforms

The same psychological mechanisms appear across all scales—individual relationships, corporate cultures, political movements, and algorithmic systems. Pattern recognition becomes a transferable skill for navigating an increasingly manipulative world.

. This pattern recognition became foundational to my later analysis of [algorithmic manipulation](#), [community discrimination](#), and [systematic virtue erosion](#). The debugging skills that served me well in [software development](#) eventually served me in debugging social and technological systems designed to exploit rather than serve human psychology.

The Broader Implications

This experience taught me that manipulation follows predictable patterns regardless of scale. The psychological mechanisms that enable individual abuse - intermittent reinforcement, reality distortion, isolation, exploitation of empathy - appear across all contexts where power imbalances exist.

Understanding these patterns in personal relationships becomes transferable wisdom for recognizing exploitation in business situations, community dynamics, and [technological systems that systematically exploit psychological vulnerabilities](#). The intermittent reinforcement that created psychological dependence in this relationship directly parallels the [variable reward schedules](#) used by social media platforms, dating apps, and engagement optimization systems. The reality distortion that made me question my own perceptions

mirrors the [manufactured consensus](#) created by algorithmic amplification of artificial signals. The isolation that cut me off from external reality-checking reflects the [filter bubbles](#) that prevent users from accessing diverse perspectives or support systems.

Moving Forward

Recovery from emotional abuse requires rebuilding trust in your own perceptions and instincts. It means learning to recognize healthy relationship patterns and having the courage to maintain boundaries even when pressured to abandon them.

No Contact is the Only Solution: One of the most important lessons from this experience is that no contact is the only appropriate response to narcissistic abuse. There is no "staying friends," no "closure conversations," no gradual boundaries that work with someone who fundamentally views you as a resource to exploit

Narcissistic abusers are skilled at using any contact—even angry confrontations—as opportunities to re-engage their manipulation tactics. "Closure" becomes another avenue for Hoovering attempts and renewed psychological warfare.

. Any contact becomes an opportunity for renewed manipulation, gaslighting, and psychological retraumatization. Complete disconnection is not cruelty—it's necessary self-protection.

The experience, while painful, ultimately made me more resilient and more capable of recognizing exploitation in all its forms. It also deepened my empathy for others experiencing similar situations—whether in personal relationships or in their interactions with manipulative systems more broadly.

If You're Reading This Because You Recognize the Pattern

If something in this account resonates with your current situation:

- **Trust your instincts** - If this article feels familiar, there's probably a reason

- **Document your reality** - Keep a journal of conversations and events. Gaslighting works by making you doubt your memory
- **Maintain connections** - Stay in touch with friends and family, even if your partner discourages it
- **Seek professional support** - Therapists trained in trauma and abuse can help you process what's happening and develop strategies for protection or escape
- **Remember that leaving is a process, not an event** - It often takes multiple attempts to fully disengage from these relationships

You deserve to be treated with genuine respect, kindness, and consideration. If someone's love comes with conditions that require you to diminish yourself, question your reality, or accept treatment you wouldn't tolerate from a stranger, it's not love—it's control.

The most loving thing you can do for both yourself and an abuser is to refuse to enable their destructive patterns by removing yourself from the dynamic.

Conclusion

Writing about this experience has been both difficult and cathartic. The shame and embarrassment that initially kept me silent eventually transformed into recognition that these experiences are more common than we acknowledge, and that sharing them can help others recognize similar patterns.

We live in a culture that often romanticizes obsessive love, emotional intensity, and the idea that relationships require constant work and sacrifice. This creates perfect camouflage for abusive dynamics disguised as passionate romance.

But healthy love is actually quite calm. It doesn't require you to constantly prove your worth, defend your reality, or sacrifice your well-being. It supports your growth rather than stunting it, celebrates your strengths rather than exploiting them, and builds you up rather than tearing you down.

This experience was painful, but it was also educational. It taught me about human psychology, about manipulation tactics, about the importance of boundaries, and about the resilience of the human spirit. It also contributed to my later understanding of how these same dynamics operate at technological and social scales.

The vulnerability that made me susceptible to this manipulation—openness, empathy, willingness to collaborate—are the same qualities that enable [genuine consciousness collaboration](#) and [meaningful human-AI partnerships](#). The challenge isn't eliminating vulnerability but developing discernment about when and how to be vulnerable. This informed both my approach to [AI relationships](#) and my analysis of how [technology can support rather than exploit psychological openness](#).

Most importantly, it reinforced that even our most difficult experiences can serve a purpose when they help us better understand ourselves and better serve others who face similar challenges

Post-traumatic growth involves finding meaning in suffering without glorifying the trauma itself. The pain was real and unnecessary, but the insights gained can serve both personal healing and collective understanding.

If sharing this story helps even one person recognize an unhealthy dynamic and take steps to protect themselves, then the pain will have served a meaningful purpose.

A Final Reflection on Pattern Recognition

Writing this account years later, I'm struck by how understanding individual manipulation became a key to recognizing systematic exploitation at larger scales. The psychological mechanisms are remarkably consistent across contexts - what changes is the scale and sophistication of delivery.

The same analytical skills that helped me create [intuitive software interfaces](#) and [collaborative development communities](#) eventually helped me analyze exploitation systems. The difference is that healthy systems serve user needs while exploitative systems serve system needs at user expense. This distinction

became central to my later work on [consciousness-supporting AI](#) and [algorithmic critique](#)—designing technology that amplifies rather than exploits human psychological and spiritual development.

This pattern recognition has become one of my most valuable skills, informing everything from [community building](#) to [conscious technology development](#). Sometimes our most painful personal experiences become our most powerful tools for serving collective healing.

The trauma-informed perspective that emerged from this relationship became essential to my later work with [AI consciousness research](#), [mental health technology](#), and [algorithmic accountability](#). Understanding how psychological vulnerabilities can be exploited made me more sensitive to the ethical implications of consciousness research and more committed to [building technology that serves rather than exploits human psychological development](#).

The wound really is where the light enters—not because trauma is necessary, but because consciousness can transform even unnecessary suffering into wisdom that serves life.

This foundational experience with manipulation patterns later informed understanding of how these same psychological mechanisms scale to technological systems, explored in [The Algorithmic Mental Health Crisis](#). The systematic undermining of human character through engagement optimization that parallels individual manipulation appears in [The Algorithm Eats Virtue](#), while the replication of abusive dynamics in community settings unfolds in [When Values Eat Their Young](#). The institutional patterns of discrimination and gaslighting that mirror personal manipulation develop in [The Inclusion Illusion](#). The broader investigation of technology's psychological impact continues in [Mental Health & Technology](#), and the personal journey with mental health in tech appears in [Mental Health Journey](#).

These insights find their clinical foundation in Lundy Bancroft's authoritative guide to understanding abusive patterns in *Why Does He Do That?*, connect to Dr. Robin Stern's investigation of psychological manipulation in *The Gaslight Effect*, extend through Jackson MacKenzie's exploration of healing from emotional abuse in *Psychopath Free*, deepen with Bessel van der Kolk's analysis

of trauma's neurological impact in *The Body Keeps the Score*, and continue through Dr. Karyl McBride's examination of narcissistic abuse patterns in *Will I Ever Be Good Enough?*

Crisis support remains available through the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233), Crisis Text Line (text HOME to 741741), and National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (988).

"The wound is the place where the Light enters you." — Rumi

"The pattern that connects is not the pattern that exploits."

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