

TORCH & SOUL

Stop Misdiagnosing Your Relationship

by Melissa Bilbruck | Torch & Soul

Before You Start

You've already done the hard part. You've got a week of evidence from Trust What You Saw. You've got a timeline, a pressure map, a standard, a rule, and scripts from Stop the Loop. You know it's real. You've stopped needing more proof of that.

Chances are you've spent months circling this. Reading lists of red flags that half-fit and half don't. Landing on "narcissist" one week and "maybe he's just avoidant" the next, depending on which article you read at 2 a.m. That back-and-forth isn't a sign you're bad at this. It's a sign you've been trying to name a pattern using someone else's checklist instead of your own dated, specific evidence.

The wrong name doesn't just feel unsatisfying — it sends you toward the wrong response. You brace for manipulation that was never coming, or you keep extending patience to something that was never going to change. Getting the name right is what lets you stop spinning and start acting on what you actually have in front of you.

Now you want something else. You want the right name for it.

Not to win an argument. Not to have a word to throw at them the next time things get heated. You want the name because it changes what you can reasonably expect.

"Naming it wrong costs you something either way."

Call a narcissistic pattern "just avoidance" and you'll spend another year waiting for consistency to work on someone it never works on. Call ordinary mishandled conflict "narcissism" and you'll walk away from something that could have actually been repaired, carrying a label that was never accurate in the first place.

The name isn't a formality. It's the thing that tells you where to put your energy next.

"You already have the evidence. This just helps you name it."

This isn't a quiz. There's no score at the end. What I'm going to do is describe four different patterns, clearly, one at a time. You're going to hold each one up against your own timeline and ask yourself one simple question: Does this match, or doesn't it?

|Go get your timeline from Stop the Loop before you start. You'll want it open next to this.

PATTERN ONE

The Narcissistic Pattern

Here's what this one actually looks like, underneath the label.

The story changes depending on who's listening.

What you get told in private is not what gets told to your friends, their family, or the people who only see the good version. When you catch a contradiction, the response isn't confusion or embarrassment. It's redirection. Suddenly you're the one being questioned, not them.

Apologies happen, but they don't come with any real change behind them.

You'll notice the same apology showing up again, almost word for word, after the same kind of incident, months apart. "I know I shouldn't have done that, but you have to understand I was under a lot of pressure, and it won't happen again" is not a repair. It's a reset button. It clears the tension without touching the behavior.

The affection doesn't feel steady.

It shows up strongest right after they've been caught, or right before they need something. The warmth is real in the moment it's happening. What makes it a tactic is the timing, not the sincerity.

Boundaries get treated as a personal insult.

Saying no doesn't lead to a conversation. It leads to punishment, dressed up as hurt feelings, silence, or suddenly needing something from you that makes your no inconvenient.

What Holding A Standard Produces

This is the clearest test in the whole guide, so it's worth walking through slowly. Set a specific, consistent standard with a narcissistic pattern — the kind from Stop the Loop, something concrete like "if I catch one more inconsistency I can't explain away, I say it once and stop discussing it that day" — and hold it exactly the same way every single time.

Here is what tends to happen next, in order. First, testing: they push against the new line to see if it's real, often within days. Second, escalation dressed as something else: the same six tactics from your Pressure Map, but sharper and more specific to you personally, because they've been watching what worked before. Third, a new tactic appears that you haven't seen before — because the old ones stopped working, not because they ran out of ideas.

What almost never happens is the thing you're hoping for: the standard itself producing real, lasting behavior change. Compare that against Pattern Three below, where the exact same consistency from you can function as the missing piece. That contrast is the whole point of reading both patterns before you decide which one you're in. If holding your line produced new tactics instead of new behavior, write that down. It's the single most reliable data point in your entire timeline.

What this pattern is not: someone who is selfish in an ordinary way, having a bad month, or occasionally puts their own needs first. What separates this pattern is the redirection under contradiction, the recycled apology, the scheduled warmth, and the boundary-as-insult — together, and repeatedly.

"With a narcissistic pattern, the same consistency usually produces better tactics, not real change."

Now look at your timeline. How many entries involve a story that changed depending on the audience. How many apologies repeat with nothing different underneath them. How many times did a boundary get treated as an attack instead of a request. Write down what you notice.

PATTERN TWO

The Avoidant Pattern

This one gets confused with the first one a lot, and it's worth telling them apart, because the confusion costs you something real.

If you mistake avoidance for a narcissistic pattern, you may end up bracing for manipulation that isn't actually happening.

If you mistake a narcissistic pattern for avoidance, you may keep giving space to someone who was never going to use it to come closer.

Someone avoidant pulls away from closeness.

Not because they're managing you, but because closeness itself feels like too much. When things get serious or intense, they go quiet, change the subject, or physically leave the room. It's not usually followed by punishment. It's usually just absence.

They're not typically rewriting the story for different audiences.

They're just not saying much at all, to anyone. If you compared what they told their friend to what they told you, you'd likely find less detail across the board, not a version curated specifically to make you look unreasonable.

Contradictions are more about avoiding discomfort than controlling you.

If you catch one, the reaction tends to be sheepish or embarrassed, not sharpened into a counter-accusation. There's a difference between someone who got caught and immediately turns the conversation back onto you, and someone who got caught and goes quiet because they don't know what to say.

Boundaries often get treated as a relief, not an attack.

If you say "I need some space tonight," someone avoidant is often quietly grateful. Someone in Pattern One is often quietly furious, even if it doesn't show right away.

The Hardest Thing About This Pattern

Here's what makes this one genuinely hard to sit with, even once you've correctly named it: there's no villain to point to. Nobody is managing you, rewriting the story, or testing your boundaries on purpose. What you're up against is someone who experiences closeness itself as more than they can hold, and that produces a very specific, very real loneliness — the loneliness of reaching for someone who isn't punishing you for reaching, just isn't reaching back.

From the outside, and sometimes from the inside too, that loneliness can look almost identical to the confusion you'd feel with Pattern One. You keep asking "what did I do wrong" in both cases. But the cause is completely different, and so is what you're actually deciding. With a narcissistic pattern, you're deciding how much of yourself you're willing to keep losing. With avoidance, you're deciding how long you can live at this particular distance, waiting for a closeness that may or may not ever arrive.

What this pattern is not: the absence of care, or automatically "fine, just leave it alone." Avoidance has its own real costs. But it is a fundamentally different problem to solve than a pattern built on control.

Look at your timeline again. Is what you're seeing mostly silence and distance, or is it mostly active redirection and blame. Is the story changing because they're avoiding you, or because they're managing multiple versions of themselves on purpose.

PATTERN THREE

Someone Who's Never Been Held Accountable

This one is subtler, and it's often mistaken for the first pattern because some of the behavior looks similar on the surface. Both can involve deflection. Both can involve a shallow apology. The difference is underneath, in what's actually driving it, and in what happens next when you push.

Someone who's never had to answer for their actions often reacts with genuine confusion, not calculation.

They're not managing an image across different audiences on purpose. They've just never had anyone push back hard enough for long enough that they had to build a real response to it.

When you catch a contradiction, you might get real surprise.

It can sound almost childlike: "Wait, I said that? I don't — okay, I guess I did say that. I don't really have a good reason." Compare that to the smooth, immediate redirection in Pattern One. The clumsiness itself is information.

Apologies can be genuine but shallow.

This is a person who has rarely, if ever, had to truly reckon with the discomfort of understanding what their behavior cost someone else. The apology is real in intent. It's underdeveloped in execution, the way any skill is underdeveloped when nobody ever required you to build it.

"The difference from Pattern One is what happens over time when you hold your standard steady. With someone who's never been held accountable, consistent expectations sometimes produce real, if slow, change. With a narcissistic pattern, the same consistency usually produces better tactics, not real change."

Give them a clear, specific standard, held consistently over time, and you sometimes see real effort. Not perfect. Real. This is the single most important marker in this whole guide, and it's worth pausing on: this is the pattern where consistency from you can actually function as the missing consequence.

What this pattern is not: a free pass, or an indefinite waiting period. The test isn't whether they seem like a good person. The test is what your own timeline shows happened after you held the line — not once, but across a stretch of time long enough to actually see a pattern in the response.

What To Watch For Over Time

Before you can evaluate what you're seeing, you need to know what you're actually watching for — not feelings, behaviors. Real change over thirty days tends to look like this: the same specific thing you named gets noticeably better without you having to raise it again, effort shows up even when you're not watching, and small slips get caught and corrected by them, not by you.

Staying the same over thirty days looks like this: effort that only appears right after you bring something up, then quietly fades once the pressure is off; the same specific incident recurring in a slightly different form; or two good weeks followed by a full slide back to where things started. That last pattern is the one people miss most often, because two good weeks feels like proof of change while it's happening. It's not. The only thing that counts as proof is what's still true in week four, after the relief of week two has worn off and nobody's actively watching anymore.

Ordinary Conflict, Mishandled Over Time

Sometimes what's actually happening is not a pattern belonging to one person at all. It's two people who never learned how to fight fairly, repeating the same unresolved argument in different clothes, without either person managing or controlling the other on purpose.

Both people usually have their own account of the story.

And the two accounts genuinely conflict, without one side clearly fabricating anything. This is a meaningful distinction from Pattern One. In a narcissistic pattern, when you lay the two versions side by side, one of them typically doesn't hold up under scrutiny. In ordinary mishandled conflict, both versions can be internally consistent and still be in real, honest tension.

Both people can point to something the other did that hurt them.

Apologies happen from both sides. Neither side is only ever the one apologizing. If your timeline shows entries where you were also short-tempered, also defensive, also slow to own your part — that's not evidence against you. It's a sign you may be looking at this pattern.

There isn't a consistent one-way pattern of control.

It's messier than that. It's mutual, even if not equal in a given moment. One person may raise their voice more. The other may go cold more. Neither of those, on their own, adds up to a pattern of control.

What this pattern is not: an excuse for behavior that actually belongs in one of the first three patterns. "We both have our issues" can be used as a deflection to blur situations that are actually one-sided. The test is the same: what your specific, dated entries actually show, from both directions, when you're honest about your own part in them.

What This Pattern Actually Needs

"Both of you doing something differently" isn't a vague nice-to-have here — it means something specific. It means each of you can name your own repeated move in the loop — the raised voice, the going cold, the sarcastic dig — without immediately pointing at the other person's move to justify your own. It means a changed response gets met with a changed response, instead of the old pattern being tested to see if it still works.

One person changing alone, without the other doing the same, tends to produce something that looks like progress for a few weeks and then quietly resets, because the loop needs both parts to keep running. This is genuinely the pattern most likely to respond to structure — an agreed-on way to pause and restart a fight, for instance — which is exactly why it's also the one most likely to get misidentified. It's tempting to call this pattern "narcissism" when you're exhausted and looking for a reason to finally stop trying. Your timeline is what tells you honestly whether that's what's happening, or whether it's this.

The Four-Question Comparison Process

You've now read all four patterns once. Before you land on one, run your timeline through this process, in order. Don't skip ahead to the answer that feels right emotionally — walk each step, in sequence.

1. Sort your entries by direction, not by feeling.

For every entry on your timeline, write one letter next to it: O for one-directional (something was done to you, and only to you), or M for mutual (both people contributed). A timeline that's overwhelmingly O points you toward Patterns One, Two, or Three. A genuine mix points you toward Pattern Four.

2. For every O entry, test what happened to the story.

When a contradiction came up, what happened next? Circle one: redirected onto you, genuine confusion and a clumsy attempt to explain, or quiet withdrawal. If redirection dominates → Pattern One. If confusion dominates → Pattern Three. If withdrawal dominates → Pattern Two.

3. Find every entry where you already held a line.

For each one, write down what happened in the days that followed: did the same behavior return in a smarter form, did real effort follow, or did the person simply back off and give you space? This single step does more diagnostic work than the other three combined.

4. Weigh the apologies against each other.

Are they close to word-for-word repeats, polished but never followed by different behavior? Pattern One. Short, underdeveloped, but followed by some visible effort? Pattern Three. Largely absent? Pattern Two. Apologies from both people, imperfect on both sides? Pattern Four.

5. Total the pattern that kept showing up, and name it in writing.

When three or four data points point toward the same pattern, that's your answer. When they don't line up cleanly, trust step three above the others — what happened after you held a real line, over real time, is the single strongest piece of evidence you have.

Seeing It In Action

Here's what it looks like when someone actually runs a real timeline through all five steps.

Call her someone. She had fourteen entries over three weeks. Twelve were marked O, two were marked M — and both of the M entries were from weeks when she'd been unusually withdrawn herself, so she noted that honestly instead of letting it inflate the O column.

In step two, eleven of the twelve O entries showed redirection when a contradiction came up — not confusion, not withdrawal. Redirection, every time, onto her.

In step three, she found two entries where she'd already held a real line. Both times, the same behavior returned within a week, wearing a slightly different outfit — different excuse, same shape.

In step four, she laid the apologies side by side across four months. They were close to word for word identical each time: sorry, pressure, won't happen again.

She landed on Pattern One. Nobody had to tell her. She didn't feel triumphant about it, and she didn't feel devastated either — she just finally had a name that matched fourteen dated entries instead of a feeling she couldn't fully explain to anyone, including herself. That's what this process is actually for.

Putting It Together

Read back everything you just wrote across all four patterns and all five steps. You're not looking for a perfect match. Real situations are rarely perfectly clean. You're looking for which one your timeline actually resembles most, once you're honest about it.

Which pattern showed up most often when you compared it to your actual entries?

Which pattern explains what happens when you hold a boundary or a standard steady over time?

Is this coming from one direction, or from both?

Write down the name you'd give this, in your own words, based on what you just saw. Not because I told you what to call it. Because your own evidence pointed you there.

This is usually the moment it stops feeling like a puzzle and starts feeling like a fact. That shift matters. A puzzle invites you to keep turning it over, looking for the interpretation that hurts less. A fact just sits there, true, whether or not you keep examining it. You're not trying to talk yourself into a conclusion here — you're reading back evidence you already collected, on your own, before you knew where it would lead.

What To Do With The Name

You didn't need a quiz to tell you this. You needed to see four clear descriptions, side by side with your own timeline, and let your own evidence do the work.

Whatever you landed on, write it down plainly, and keep it next to your Stop the Loop pages. This changes what you can reasonably expect going forward — and it should change what you do next, in a specific, practical way.

Here's what the name does not do, and it matters that you hear this part too. It does not make the next decision for you. It does not tell you to stay or to go, and anyone who tells you a label alone should decide that for you is selling you something simpler than your actual life. What it does is much smaller, and much more useful: it tells you what you can reasonably expect from here, based on what has actually happened so far, not on what you're still hoping might happen instead. That's a foundation, not a verdict. Whatever you build next — leaving, staying and holding a harder line, trying repair with someone who's shown you real effort — you're building it on solid ground now, instead of on a guess you talked yourself into during a calm morning. That's the entire difference this guide was built to make.

IF YOU LANDED ON THE NARCISSISTIC PATTERN

Stop measuring progress by their intentions, apologies, or promises, and start measuring it only by your own Decision Standard from Stop the Loop. Consistency from you will not produce real change in them — plan around that fact. Your standard exists to protect you regardless of whether they ever meet it.

IF YOU LANDED ON THE AVOIDANT PATTERN

The work here is about whether closeness is possible at all with this person, not whether they're managing you. Decide how long you're willing to wait for that gap to close, and hold that timeline the same way you'd hold any other standard.

IF YOU LANDED ON SOMEONE WHO'S NEVER BEEN HELD ACCOUNTABLE

Set the same clear, specific standard from Stop the Loop, hold it without exception, and watch — not for perfection, but for direction. Real, if imperfect, effort over a meaningful stretch of time is the marker you're looking for.

IF YOU LANDED ON ORDINARY CONFLICT, MISHANDLED OVER TIME

This is the pattern most likely to actually respond to both of you doing something differently. The evidence you gathered isn't a case against one person. It's a record of a loop, and loops are things two people can, in some cases, learn to break together.

"Either way, you're not guessing anymore. You named it yourself, using what you already built."

With truth and fire,

Melissa — Torch & Soul

Ignite Your Purpose. Fuel Your Soul.