

Overcoming Narcissism in the Workplace

Technical How-to Guide



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This technical guide by Hezron Ochiel draws from his personal experiences observing narcissism among family, friends, and colleagues. As a survivor of narcissistic abuse, he has firsthand insight into the challenges it brings and offers practical strategies for overcoming them. His journey, supported by friends and family, provided the encouragement needed to complete this guide.



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1 INTRODUCTION

When we hear the word "abuse," our thoughts often quickly gravitate toward physical violence, sexual assault, or gender-based violence.

But there's a more insidious form of abuse that often goes unnoticed—emotional abuse, inflicted by a narcissistic personality. Experts warn that this type of abuse may not leave visible scars, yet it strips years from a person's life, inflicting deep emotional and psychological wounds.

Throughout my life, I have witnessed the loss of relatives, friends, and coworkers who suffered from the possible subtle effects of narcissistic abuse. Their cries for help often went unheard, and tragically, no one came to their aid simply because they didn't understand the pain they were enduring.

MY STORY

Have you ever felt trapped in a dark pit, struggling to climb out, yet no help seems to come your way?

This is the feeling I had in the hands of a narcissistic coworker.

Some years back, in my quest for employment, I landed in the hands of a narcissistic colleague, who would later train his guns on me.

PURPOSE

In this guide, I open up about my long struggle with a narcissistic coworker, a battle that pushed me into deep mental and emotional darkness. I'll share the steps I took to reclaim my peace and rebuild my strength, aiming to ignite courage and hope in anyone going through similar pain on their healing journey from narcissistic abuse.

Plus, I'll offer important policy recommendations for employers to create a healthier, more supportive workplace environment.

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WHAT IS NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER?

Narcissistic [personality disorder \(NPD\)](#) is a mental health condition that affects how you view yourself and relate to others. People with NPD often exhibit unhealthy patterns of behavior, [displaying grandiosity, unreasonable expectations](#) of favorable treatment, and a marked lack of empathy for others.

Victims of narcissistic abuse commonly experience gaslighting, contempt, and emotional withholding, leaving them feeling confused, isolated, and worthless.

BACK TO MY STORY

Everything seemed perfect when I joined what I thought was my dream job. On my first day, I was welcomed with open arms, and I believed I had finally found the ideal place to grow my career.

Words like "we are a family," "we value innovation," and "we thrive on collaboration" were tossed around, filling me with a sense of belonging I had not felt in years. But little did I know I was stepping into a trap that would ultimately leave me wounded and devastated.

I overlooked the red flags. At that time, six team members had left the company, but I didn't investigate the reasons. How pathetic is that? My communication class taught me to interpret everything, even the things that go unsaid. Blinded by the warmth and attention I was showered with; I chose to ignore the warning signs. There were parties, gifts, a posh office space, and friendly smiles everywhere—all meant to make me feel welcome.

HOW COMMON IS NPD?

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is [estimated](#) to affect approximately 0.5% to 5% of the U.S. population, with studies indicating that men constitute 50% to 75% of those diagnosed.

BACK TO MY STORY

I was, quite literally, “bombed with love”. [“Love bombing”](#) is a manipulation tactic often used by narcissistic personalities to gain control over their partners or victims. It involves overwhelming someone with excessive affection, compliments, gifts, and attention to create a sense of emotional dependence.

Finally, I settled in to do the work I had come for, excited to embark on my role.

But behind the scenes, some colleagues were quietly sympathetic—they knew all too well what lay ahead for me. One day, one of them asked, “Of all places, why did you choose to work here, when we are all desperate for a way out?” The question hit me like a warning siren, leaving me wondering what hidden truth could provoke such a remark.

A year later, everything was going smoothly—until one fateful evening when a colleague burst into my office, visibly shaken and overwhelmed, clutching her head in pain from relentless headaches.

This came after she had endured a full day of meetings with the narcissistic coworker.

At the time, I was two years old in the company, and the experience marked a turning point.

Before I could even ask what had transpired, she began to vent: “I feel like I can’t breathe anymore. I am suffocating, helpless.” When I gently asked her to explain, she replied, “I can’t put it into words—I feel like I’m losing my mind. I am overwhelmed.” In my ignorance, I assumed she was just tired or hungry, and I then reached for a cup to serve her some tea. But then she added, “I think I am dealing with a sadist.” Her words struck a chord.

Suddenly, bizarre behaviours started to emerge. I was met with vague instructions, belittling comments, a web of lies, and impossible targets—tasks that should have taken weeks or even months to complete were now expected in just days if not hours. It was clear that the ‘honeymoon’ phase was over, and I was about to pay for all the good times I had enjoyed. The narcissist was out for my blood.

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HOW I WAS MANIPULATED BY A NARCISSIST

Over time, the subtle red flags turned into glaring warnings. When some people say they dread Monday blues and bad days, as for me, I had a bad day from Monday to Friday.

Anytime a call or text message came in, I did not expect anything good other than belittling, name-calling, or lecturing—things I used to watch in my favorite Nigerian movies.

It started as early as 6:30 a.m., the moment I would turn on my data to catch up with the latest news, I would be hit with a flood of WhatsApp messages, asking for this and that.

By 7:30 am, the relentless phone calls would start, lasting throughout the entire day. It felt like I was a customer care officer, except that while customer service reps occasionally get compliments from satisfied clients, my experience was more like a prison.

And remember, I am speeding down the highway at 100 kilometers per hour, trying to beat the morning traffic. I had little choice but to answer, knowing the consequences of ignoring them. By the time I reached the office, I was already drained, head pounding, wondering how much longer I could keep up with this endless grind.

Through these experiences, I realized just how deeply a narcissist can impact your emotional well-being, leaving you in a constant state of doubt and frustration.

OTHER MANIPULATIVE TECHNIQUES INCLUDED:

- *Lack of compassion when unwell – Ignores health needs, prioritizing own agenda.*
- *Endless project reviews – Creates redundant revisions, wasting time.*
- *Issuing similar tasks – Assigns duplicate tasks, confusing.*
- *Nonstop communication – unending calls and messages.*
- *Divide and rule – Isolates team members to prevent alliances.*
- *Prolonged meetings – Schedules numerous unproductive meetings, draining energy.*
- *Vague instructions – Provides unclear tasks, later blaming others.*
- *Always blaming others – Avoids responsibility, deflecting onto others.*
- *Bombarding with too many instructions – Overwhelms with excessive, contradictory directions.*

4 EMOTIONAL IMPACT

I was slowly descending into darkness, both mentally and emotionally. It was not long before I started experiencing mysterious aches, constant fatigue, and worn down by unrelenting stress. I started questioning my self-worth, grappling with anxiety, depression, and an overwhelming sense of worthlessness.

The constant belittling and manipulation chipped away at my self-esteem, leaving me drained of motivation for anything I once enjoyed. I began to withdraw from any situation that might be seen as challenging my abuser.

I slowly became a "yes man," often agreeing to things I knew were outright wrong. All in the name of wanting some sort of peace, a chance to escape the turmoil that had consumed my life.

I swung from a devastated life to discouragement, from distasteful living to the despair of hope, and from the despair of hope to a relentless struggle for meaning and healing. That was my life every single minute at the company. It is an experience you would not wish on anyone, not even your worst enemy.

At this time, hospital visits became frequent as I sought relief from persistent, challenging headaches.

The nights stretched endlessly as I battled insomnia, my eyes wide open, rolling restlessly as I waited for morning to bring some reprieve. Each hour felt like a weight pressing down, my mind tangled in the anxiety of what the next day would bring.



In desperation, I cut out sugar and salt from my meals, clinging to the hope that maybe, just maybe, it would ease the relentless migraines.

One morning, I stopped by a nearby health facility to check my weight, only to discover I'd lost nearly 10 kilograms. At that moment, I knew something had to change, and fast. I had to reach out for help.

Yet, each time I tried to explain my situation to my superiors, it felt as though my words fell on deaf ears. No one seemed to grasp the depth of my pain; no one understood narcissism. Even the tragic story of my teammate, who was suspected to have taken his life after a prolonged, painful struggle with the narcissist, failed to move them. One of them looked at me skeptically and said, "I do not understand how that could even be possible. The person you are talking about is so 'friendly' and 'charming'. I just don't see him doing any of that."

Another dismissed me altogether, advising, "You just need to figure out a way to work together." Their responses left me feeling utterly isolated as if the agony I was facing was nothing more than a figment of my imagination.

At that moment, I felt the most painful, hopeless, and desperate emotions I had ever known. I began to believe I was 'losing my mind'. But deep down, I felt something was terribly wrong, and I knew it wasn't of my own making.

I found myself wallowing in a miasma of hopelessness and despair, realizing I was truly alone on this journey. All I had left to cling to was my faith, praying that only God's intervention would carry me through this journey.

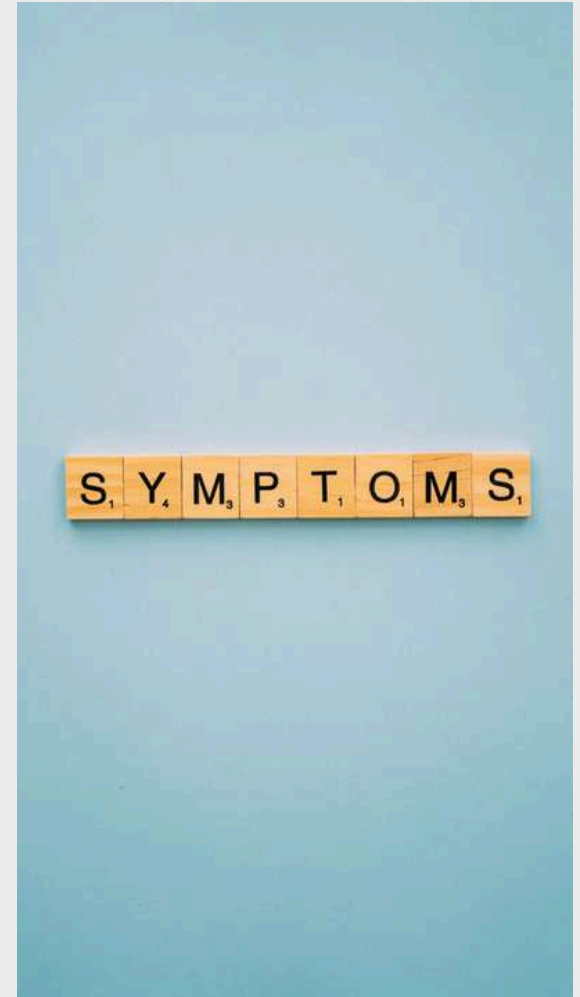


5 SYMPTOMS OF NARCISSISM

Identifying the [symptoms](#) of narcissism can be challenging, as narcissistic behavior often presents itself subtly at first but can escalate into patterns that are emotionally damaging to those around them.

Let's take a closer look at the primary indicators of narcissism and how they appear in daily interactions:

- Exhibit an inflated sense of self-importance and demand continuous admiration.
- Feel entitled to privileges and special treatment.
- Expect acknowledgment as superior, regardless of actual accomplishments.
- Magnify their achievements and talents.
- Get lost in fantasies of success, power, or ideal relationships.
- Consider themselves better than others and seek the company of similarly "special" individuals.
- Critique and belittle those they deem unimportant.
- Anticipate favors and compliance from others without question.
- Exploit others to fulfill their desires.
- Lack of awareness of others' needs and feelings.
- Experience envy towards others while believing they are envied.
- Display arrogance and boastfulness.
- Insist on having the finest possessions, such as cars or office spaces.



SYMPTOMS OF NARCISSISM

Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder often [struggle with criticism](#). When faced with perceived challenges to their self-image, they may:

- Become irritable or angry if they feel unrecognized.
- Struggle with interpersonal relationships and feel easily slighted.
- Respond with rage or disdain, attempting to belittle others to elevate themselves.
- Have trouble regulating emotions and behaviors.
- Find it challenging to cope with stress and adjust to change.
- Avoid situations where they could fail.
- Experience feelings of depression and moodiness due to unmet perfectionist standards.
- Harbor underlying insecurities, shame, and fear of being unmasked as a failure



6 WHAT CAUSES NARCISSISM?

Narcissism does not have a single [cause](#), but various factors can contribute to the development of narcissistic personality disorder. The primary sources include:

- **Negative Childhood Experiences:** Studies indicate that experiences such as rejection or excessive criticism from parents can significantly impact a child's emotional development, leading to NPD in adulthood. Conversely, overindulgence or excessive praise can also foster a sense of entitlement and self-importance.
- **Persistent Emotional Abuse:** Prolonged emotional abuse during childhood, especially without adequate support, can result in deeply damaged self-esteem. This lack of validation and support often drives individuals to develop narcissistic traits as a coping mechanism.
- **Spoiled Child Syndrome:** Children who consistently receive what they want, particularly through tantrums or manipulation, may grow up with a grandiose sense of self-importance and entitlement. This can instill a belief that they are superior to others and deserve special treatment.
- **Unresolved Anger or Trauma:** Individuals who harbor unresolved anger or trauma from their past may project these feelings through narcissistic behaviors. This reaction often serves as a defense mechanism to mask vulnerability and protect their self-image.



7 TYPES OF NARCISSISTS

- **Grandiose Narcissists** – Known for a high sense of self-importance, entitlement, and need for admiration. They exude confidence, and dominance, and often see themselves as superior. Grandiose narcissists frequently seek power, validation, and attention through achievements and status, often dismissing or belittling others to stay in the spotlight.
- **Vulnerable (Covert) Narcissists** – Unlike grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists have underlying insecurity and sensitivity to criticism. They may appear anxious or even shy, masking their narcissistic traits. They may use passive aggression or manipulation to gain sympathy or attention, often becoming defensive or hurt if their sense of self is threatened.
- **Malignant Narcissists** – This type has elements of narcissism combined with aggression and, in some cases, antisocial traits. Malignant narcissists can be particularly vindictive and lack empathy. They engage in bullying, deceit, or even harm others to maintain control or assert power, often deriving satisfaction from causing distress to others.
- **Communal Narcissists** – Communal narcissists project a “heroic” or altruistic self-image, often believing they are more moral or kind than others. Their acts of kindness are often self-serving, as they expect admiration for their “good deeds.” They may grow resentful if not praised or recognized for their contributions.



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LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF NARCISSISTIC ABUSE

Experiencing narcissistic abuse can lead to lasting, often profound, effects that can be challenging to overcome. While some of these effects may be relatively mild, others can be severe and even life-threatening.

Common long-term impacts of narcissistic abuse include:

- Persistent anxiety and depressive episodes
- Development of post-traumatic stress symptoms
- Diminished self-worth and a feeling of losing one's identity
- Difficulty in self-forgiveness due to feelings of inadequacy
- Physical manifestations like chronic headaches or stomach issues
- Sleep disturbances from stress and racing thoughts
- Recurring nightmares
- Impaired short-term memory
- Frequent mood fluctuations and irritability
- Emotional numbness, feeling detached from reality
- Resentment or anger directed at the abuser
- Heightened risk for mental health disorders due to early-life abuse
- Distrust stemming from sustained manipulation
- Increased sensitivity to criticism or perceived judgment
- Compulsive people-pleasing behavior to gain approval
- Self-sabotaging actions, including substance abuse or bingeing behaviors.

LONG TERM EFFECT

The long-term effect of narcissistic abuse according to some experts might lead to overindulgence in drugs (if the victim abuses drugs) and sometimes an increased risk of suicide due to depression and anxiety.

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EFFECTIVE APPROACHES FOR DEALING WITH A NARCISSIST

[Dr. Ramani Durvasula](#), a Clinical Psychologist, in her book *It's Not You: How Narcissists Break Us and How to Get Whole Again*, describes, narcissists as hard to spot and masters of deception, but only to those they perceive as having power over them.

"To anyone in their power, expect gaslighting, manipulation, revenge, and rage. They have poor frustration tolerance when things don't go their way, they react very angrily, and they cannot put up with criticism or negative feedback," she explains.

"They often view themselves as victims, if things don't go their way, they feel like the world is unjustifiably coming after them," she continues.

Certain narcissistic behaviors are easier to recognize if you know the signs. One common tactic? Put-downs masked as jokes. When confronted, they'll often respond, "It was just a joke—you're too sensitive." This subtle gaslighting tactic shifts blame, making you question your reactions.

CHRONIC GAS LIGHTERS

Narcissists also tend to be chronic gas lighters, using phrases that keep you second-guessing yourself, such as:

- A sarcastic or mocking tone that belittles others.
- Claiming a "superior memory" to rewrite past events.
- Outright dismissals like, "You're wrong," or "That never happened."
- Aggressive, polarizing tactics that paint you as the "bad guy."

10 TRAUMA BONDING

While I was battling narcissism, some of my colleagues were slowly into what is called trauma bonding.

[Trauma bonding](#) is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when a person forms a strong emotional attachment to someone abusive or harmful. This bond is often characterized by intense feelings of loyalty, dependence, and attachment, despite the negative impact of the relationship.

The bond is usually reinforced by a cycle of abuse followed by periods of affection or kindness, creating a confusing and emotionally charged connection.

Victims of trauma bonding may find it difficult to leave the abusive relationship because of the deep emotional ties and the hope that the abuser will change. Trauma bonding is common in abusive relationships, including those involving domestic violence, cults, or human trafficking.



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STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH A NARCISSIST

According to Dr. Ramani, narcissists are not interested in the truth; rather, their focus is on undermining you to satisfy their need for control and superiority. Even when you feel the urge to defend your position, it's crucial to remember that they are not truly listening.

To effectively manage interactions with narcissists, she outlines the following strategies:

- **Don't Defend:** Avoid defending your actions or decisions. Narcissists often twist words and create conflict, so trying to justify yourself can lead to further manipulation. Instead, remain calm and composed without feeling the need to explain yourself.
- **Don't Engage:** Steer clear of getting drawn into their drama or emotional outbursts. Engaging can escalate the situation, so it's best to remain detached and avoid reacting to provocations.
- **Don't Explain:** Narcissists rarely seek to understand your perspective. Offering explanations can be seen as a weakness and can fuel their need for control. Stick to clear, simple responses, when necessary, but avoid lengthy justifications.
- **Don't Personalize:** Remember that their behavior is a reflection of their issues, not yours. Avoid taking their comments or actions personally; this mindset can help protect your self-esteem and emotional well-being while navigating interactions with them.



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BREAKING FREE FROM THE CHAINS OF NARCISSISM

Recovering from narcissistic abuse is a journey that demands patience, self-compassion, and resilience.

Here's an 8-step process to help reclaim your life and sense of self:

- **End the Relationship:** Abusive relationships rarely improve on their own. Sometimes, ending the relationship is the surest way to reclaim your peace. In a marriage, consider filing for divorce. In a work environment, seeking a new job may be your best option.
- **Acknowledgment:** Accept that the abuse happened and recognize its impact on your life. This is essential to begin moving forward.
- **Physical Release:** Trauma often lives in the body. Engaging in exercises like yoga or kickboxing can help release the built-up anger or sadness stored within, while breathing exercises can calm lingering emotional triggers.
- **Self-Education:** Knowledge is empowering. Learning about narcissism and understanding the underlying manipulative tactics can help demystify your experience. It allows you to spot behaviors in others and detach emotionally, viewing these as their issues, not yours.
- **Set Clear, Defined Boundaries:** Ideally, avoiding contact with your abuser is the most effective way to heal. However, this may not always be possible, especially if the abuser is a spouse or coworker. In such cases, it's essential to establish clear and specific limits regarding communication. By doing so, you enhance your ability to protect yourself from further chaos and emotional harm.



BREAKING FREE FROM THE CHAINS OF NARCISSISM...CONT

- **Seek Professional Help:** A skilled counselor or therapist can offer personalized guidance, helping you process your experiences and rebuild your mental resilience. Therapy creates a safe environment to openly discuss and manage lingering trauma.
- **Prioritize Self-Care:** Physical and emotional self-care rebuilds inner strength. This might mean regular exercise, balanced nutrition, or restful sleep; each part helps restore energy and a sense of control.
- **Affirm Self-Worth:** Positive affirmations and setting boundaries are vital in re-establishing your self-worth. Affirmations help to gradually rebuild your self-esteem, replacing the narcissist's negative influence with compassion and validation.
- **Creative Expression:** Engage in hobbies that allow self-expression, like writing, art, or music. These outlets allow you to channel emotions constructively and help to reestablish joy in your daily life.
- **Develop a Support Network:** Build a circle of trusted friends, family, or support groups to lean on, share experiences with, and receive encouragement during recovery.
- **Avoid Retaliation: Resist** the urge to retaliate against your abuser, even when they try to provoke you. Engaging in conflict can escalate the situation and create more turmoil in your life.

GREY ROCK STRATEGY

Instead, consider using the "grey rock" strategy. This technique involves becoming emotionally unresponsive and intentionally dull in your interactions with the abuser, making it harder for them to provoke you. By doing so, you minimize their control over your emotions and reduce the likelihood of further conflict.



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STRATEGIES FOR EMPLOYERS TO ADDRESS NARCISSISM IN THE WORKPLACE

To effectively tackle narcissism in the workplace, employers should consider implementing the following recommendations:

- **Awareness Training:** Conduct workshops and training sessions to educate employees about narcissism, its traits, and its impacts on workplace dynamics.
- **Resources and Support:** Provide access to mental health resources, including counseling services, to help employees recognize and address narcissistic abuse.
- **Clear Policies:** Establish and enforce anti-bullying and harassment policies that specifically address narcissistic behaviors, creating a safe reporting mechanism for affected employees.
- **Regular Check-ins:** Encourage managers to have regular one-on-one meetings with staff to discuss their well-being and any interpersonal conflicts.
- **Promote Empathy:** Foster a workplace culture that values empathy, collaboration, and emotional intelligence through team-building activities and recognition programs.
- **Anonymous Surveys:** Implement anonymous surveys to gauge employee satisfaction and identify potential issues related to narcissism and workplace culture.
- **Leadership Development:** Invest in leadership training that emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence and effective communication, equipping leaders to recognize and mitigate narcissistic behaviors.



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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, narcissism is a damaging issue that can cause significant emotional and psychological turmoil for its victims. Individuals exhibiting narcissistic traits often act out of their own wounds, but they must take responsibility for their behavior. No one deserves to be treated as a punching bag or to endure relationships where their feelings are dismissed or belittled.

As awareness of narcissism increases, recognizing its harmful impact on individuals, both at home and in the workplace, becomes essential. Employers should implement policies that prioritize employee well-being, promoting an environment that actively rejects narcissistic abuse. Moreover, Continued research is vital to deepen our understanding and develop strategies to combat this insidious form of emotional abuse.

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About the Author

Hi there! I'm Hezron Ochiel, an avid storyteller and a global peak coach with a talent for blending strategic communications, best practices, and life skills into actionable strategies that drive extraordinary success. For over 15 years, I have thrived in guiding startups, large corporations, and individuals in growing their brands. I began my career as a journalist, gaining experience in creative and technical writing.

My extensive brand storytelling experience led me to the Corporate Communications and Public Relations industry, where I have been a catalyst for change.

As an experienced writer and commentator, I have appeared in many global publications, including Reuters.com, TheNewHumanitarian.org, Standardmedia.co.ke, TheGuardian.com, and one of my proudest achievements is leading a media advocacy campaign with Amref.org that culminated in the recognition of Community Health Workers (CHWs), now called Community Health Promoters, within Kenya's formal health workforce.

Additionally, I have elevated health journalism in Africa by pioneering the Health Communication and Journalism program at Amref.ac.ke and establishing the Africa Media Network on Health to spearhead media advocacy across the continent.

I have contributed to more than 50% growth of global brands such as Amref.org, HIV-Free Generation, Ichooselife.global, Goodcheckup.com, and KMTC.ac.ke through impactful PR and social media campaigns.

In 2023, as part of my Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts, I launched 'Hezron's Weekly Insights' and 'Hezron Insights' to provide resources and tools for startups, large corporations, and individuals seeking to grow their brands.

My best-selling book, "Strategic Insights: A Practical Guide for Excelling in Public Relations," highlights my commitment to sharing expertise and driving success.



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