

# Explaining DARVO: Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim & Offender

## How abusers might use these strategies to blame the survivor

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We've talked before about how survivors get arrested or even charged with domestic violence after they're the ones who call the police for help. We've also talked about how abusers can gain sympathy from friends and family when they manipulate the story to make those outside the relationship think the survivor is "the crazy one."

In these frustrating situations, a tactic called DARVO—or deny, attack, reverse victim and offender—may be utilized. It's a way abusers or others, such as law enforcement or the judicial system, might redirect blame, taking attention off of the perpetrator while accusing a victim of being the actual abusive partner.

### What Is DARVO?

Deny, attack, reverse victim and offender is a three-step method of twisting accountability. Originally coined by psychology researcher Jennifer Freyd, the DARVO process can look something like this:

1. Deny. The abuser vehemently denies the survivor's account of what happened. This can involve gaslighting the survivor to make the survivor doubt their memory of events. The survivor may begin to question whether or not they're "blowing it out of proportion" as the abuser continues to minimize what they remember happening.

2. Attack. The abuser shifts the focus to the survivor's credibility

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the survivor was reacting to the abuse being inflicted. The abuser may even insinuate that the survivor wanted what happened or that, because the couple is married, the abuser couldn't have possibly sexually assaulted them (not true, by the way). The end result can be that the survivor feels bullied or disparaged into staying quiet or may feel some sense of the abuse being their own fault. (Be aware, trauma-related guilt is a liar.)

3. Reverse Victim and Offender. The final step of this twisted manipulation tactic is for the abuser to secure their title of "victim" and position the actual survivor as the offender. They might contend that the survivor has some vendetta to destroy them. They might say the survivor is lying in order to turn people against the abuser, become more popular, "take away" their children or receive a larger divorce settlement. The abuser might claim they're a "victim of the system" (the criminal justice system). They may use their socioeconomic standing, race or gender to support their claim. All the while, the survivor's actual disclosure of abuse is overshadowed and the survivor will end up spending more time trying to defend her reputation than receiving help for the abuse.

#### A Survivor Needs Support During DARVO

It can be difficult to recognize an abuser using the DARVO tactic when you're a survivor in the middle of it. Heather Kent, registered psychotherapist, trauma recovery specialist and author of several books on surviving abuse says, "Speaking as a survivor myself, when you're still in it, it's very hard to see what's happening. It's insidious. Often it takes an outside person who witnesses it to kind of take you aside and show you what's happening and what's not OK."

She encourages survivors who suspect they're being manipulated to avoid a common suggestion from others: couples' counseling.

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“[The abuser] is just going to gaslight you and call you the abusive one. ...A therapist is not necessarily able to see what’s happening and can cause further damage and enable the abuse to continue.” Survivors also face the risk of the abuser retaliating in private, sometimes with violence, after disclosing incidents in front of a therapist. Even the threat of this can keep a survivor quiet indefinitely.

“The solution is really to get out of the situation as soon as possible. I’ve never seen a situation where an abusive partner does a 180, goes to therapy and they live happily ever after.”

(Note: Some experts say there are abusers who can reform, but the likelihood of repeat abusive incidents is high.)

### When DARVO Shows Up in the Workplace

Kent also cautions that the DARVO tactic isn’t unique to intimate partner relationships, but can also show up between coworkers in a professional setting.

“In workplace relationships, perhaps a boss might promise something or invite the employee to attend a meeting and then the employee follows up on that and the boss says, ‘We never talked about that.’” Kent says it’s a way to tear down the self-esteem of an employee for egotistical reasons. The gaslighting individual wants to feel in control, says Kent.

“Typically these people are highly insecure so they feel threatened by other people who are recognized as competent and successful or well-liked.”

The abusive leader might then try to get people wrapped up in workplace drama in order to position a group of employees against one in particular. It could involve spreading rumors or lies.

### But ... Why Even Use DARVO?

Kent says DARVO is part of the cycle of abuse that many survivors experience. The abuser uses it during the escalation and devaluing phase.

“There’s this compulsion by abusers to protect this false sense of self that they have. Internally, they can be very insecure, but they bury that so deeply in their consciousness. They just put it in a box and try to shove it away.” She says that abusers often create a façade of what they want people to think they are—which might be innocent, or a victim, even if they’re the abusive, controlling or violent one.



“So if anyone says or does anything that contradicts that, that’s when you see the blame and the rage and the lashing out because they have to protect this image of themselves that they have.”

