

DARVO and “Riding the Frequency”: A Pattern of Emotional Reversal and Exploitation

Union of Saints

DARVO—Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender—is a manipulative interpersonal pattern in which a person responds to being confronted about harmful behavior by denying or minimizing what occurred, attacking the person who raised the concern, and ultimately reversing the roles so that the person who was hurt is portrayed as the aggressor.

In the particular dynamic described here, DARVO can involve what might be called “**riding the frequency**” of an angry or emotionally charged moment.

“Riding the Frequency”

“Riding the frequency” describes the process of exploiting the heightened emotional energy of another person’s anger rather than receiving and processing the information that the anger is communicating.

When someone expresses anger because they have been hurt, anger itself can contain important information: *Something happened. It mattered. I experienced it as harmful, violating, disrespectful, or unjust.*

A healthy response does not require the other person to agree with every accusation or immediately accept blame. It does, however, require some capacity to tolerate another person’s emotional state long enough to understand what is being communicated.

In a “riding the frequency” dynamic, that process breaks down.

Instead of hearing:

“Something happened that hurt me, and I need you to understand its impact.”

the other person reacts primarily to:

“This person is angry at me, and I need to defend myself.”

The emotional intensity becomes the subject rather than the underlying grievance.

The Failure to Process Emotional Information

Part of this dynamic may involve an inability—or unwillingness—to process another person’s emotional information.

To genuinely receive someone’s anger, a person has to be able to:

1. **Receive the information:** recognize that something they did affected another person.
2. **Tolerate the emotion:** allow the other person to be angry without immediately demanding that they calm down.
3. **Separate emotion from identity:** understand that someone’s anger does not automatically mean they are attacking, irrational, or abusive.

4. **Reflect on their own behavior:** consider whether there is something they need to acknowledge or take responsibility for.
5. **Respond to the underlying issue:** address what actually happened rather than focusing exclusively on the emotional reaction.

When someone has limited emotional capacity for this process, they may become overwhelmed by the other person's anger and turn their attention inward toward self-protection.

The interaction can then become:

"I'm being attacked → I need to defend myself → I need to stop their anger → their anger is now the problem."

This can appear emotionally selfish because the person may have considerable capacity for processing **their own** feelings while having very little capacity to hold, understand, or make room for someone else's.

That does not necessarily mean the person consciously intends to be cruel. Emotional defensiveness, shame, fear, poor emotional regulation, learned family patterns, or emotional immaturity can all contribute to this response. However, when the behavior is persistent and repeatedly results in the other person being silenced, discredited, or psychologically destabilized, the impact can become abusive regardless of the person's stated intention.

How DARVO Enters the Dynamic

Once the person's anger becomes the focus, the interaction can develop into DARVO:

DENY:

The original behavior is denied, minimized, rationalized, or reframed.

ATTACK:

The injured person's emotional response becomes evidence against them. They may be called irrational, unstable, dramatic, aggressive, overly sensitive, or "crazy."

REVERSE VICTIM AND OFFENDER:

The person who raised the original grievance is recast as the aggressor, while the person being confronted presents themselves as the victim of the angry reaction.

This creates a profound reversal:

The original harm disappears, and the reaction to the harm becomes the new harm.

The conversation shifts from:

"What happened to me, and why did it hurt?"

to:

"Look at how you're behaving."

The injured person is consequently forced to defend their tone, emotional state, sanity, or character rather than being able to discuss the conduct that caused the injury in the first place.

The “Crazy-Making” Component

This can become particularly destabilizing when the person deliberately or repeatedly provokes an emotional reaction and then uses that reaction as proof that the other person is irrational.

The sequence can look like:

Hurt → expression of anger → provocation or invalidation → heightened reaction → attack on the reaction → denial of the original harm.

The person’s increasingly intense emotional response is then treated as if it arose spontaneously, rather than as something occurring within an interaction.

This can create a double bind:

If you remain calm, your hurt may be ignored. If you become angry enough to communicate the seriousness of the hurt, your anger is used to discredit you.

Over time, this can make a person question whether they are even entitled to express anger, establish boundaries, or object to mistreatment.

Why This Dynamic Can Be So Harmful

The most damaging aspect is not simply that two people are arguing.

It is the **systematic displacement of information**.

The person expressing anger is communicating something about their experience, but instead of the information being processed, the emotional energy surrounding that information is seized upon and redirected.

Their anger becomes a weapon against them.

The underlying message:

“Something you did hurt me.”

gets transformed into:

“Your reaction to what I did proves that you are the problem.”

This is why the dynamic can feel so psychologically disorienting. The person enters the interaction attempting to communicate an injury and leaves feeling as though they must defend their right to have been injured in the first place.

A Concise Definition

“Riding the frequency” within a DARVO dynamic is the exploitation of another person’s heightened emotional state—particularly anger—as a means of avoiding the information contained in that emotion, provoking or amplifying the reaction, and then using the resulting emotional intensity to invalidate, attack, or discredit the person who was originally hurt. The original grievance is denied or displaced, the injured person’s reaction becomes the focus, and the roles of victim and offender are ultimately reversed.

At its core, the dynamic can be understood as:

The harm is ignored. The reaction is amplified. The reaction is then weaponized to erase the harm.