

D.A.R.V.O: A FORM OF GASLIGHTING IN RELATIONSHIPS

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When you tell your partner that he (or she) did something that hurt you, do you ever find yourself comforting *him* at the end of the conversation? And thinking to yourself, "Wait a minute, isn't HE the one who hurt ME?!" If that scenario sounds familiar, you could be experiencing D.A.R.V.O., which is an acronym (to be defined below) that describes a particularly toxic form of gaslighting.

GASLIGHTING

By now, most people have heard of "gaslighting" -- the term is being used more and more in everyday conversation. Even so, for most of us it can be very hard to catch, especially in our closest relationships, because it takes advantage of our insecurities and deepest fears. By definition, gaslighting means deliberately manipulating someone to make them question their own reality. This can occur in many forms, and the person on the receiving end is always left doubting themselves, questioning their self-confidence and self-worth, and feeling ashamed for being overly emotional, hypersensitive, selfish, or unstable.

D.A.R.V.O

When a manipulative person is confronted about something they did or said that was hurtful, they utilize a tactic that turns the conversation around and makes the receiver believe they've done something wrong. This tactic of manipulation was studied by Dr. Jennifer Freyd, a psychological researcher and Professor Emerita who labeled it D.A.R.V.O. — an acronym that stands for **Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender**. When someone uses D.A.R.V.O., they are trying to shift the focus away from their own hurtful behavior, because that allows them to avoid taking accountability, avoid admitting they've done something wrong, avoid making difficult changes, and avoid facing unpleasant truths about themselves. Narcissistic people often use D.A.R.V.O. to ensure their own needs are met, even if it means sacrificing the needs of others and causing harm to their relationships.

NARCISSISM

At the most basic level, the narcissist is avoiding one thing: shame. The self-centered pathology of a narcissist is actually an overcorrective response to the intense shame he or she experienced in childhood — children must feel seen and heard by their parents, and they must believe their parents value them more than anything else; when those needs are not met sufficiently, children blame themselves in order to make sense of the situation. This causes intolerable shame, which is obviously extremely painful; since children cannot leave the situation, they must develop mental and psychological strategies in order to cope. Children also need realistic and consistent limits, and a sense of coherence and fairness — when those needs are not met, a child may develop a sense of entitlement and emotional hypersensitivity; if he (or she) has also experienced the shame of being unseen, unheard, unwanted, and unloved, he may learn to cope by convincing himself that he is the exact opposite of what he truly believes — instead of worthless and unimportant, his mind creates a false reality in which he is the MOST important person in the world.

D.A.R.V.O CONTINUED

Let's say you bring up a recent problem, disagreement, or hurtful comment by your partner, and you have concrete examples and perfectly valid reasons supporting your point of view — for instance: "You promised we could spend more time together, but you've been out with your friends the last three nights in a row." Or, "I explained to you why I don't like it when you shout at me — my father used to shout at my mother all the time, and it makes me feel triggered and unsafe — but last night you shouted at me when you got home from work."

HERE IS HOW IT LOOKS WHEN THIS TACTIC BEGINS:

- **DENY:** The accusation or suspicions are met with denial. The manipulator will completely deny all evidence and refuse to take any accountability for their actions. This can sound like:
 - "Are you kidding? That's not what happened."
 - "That's not how I remember it at all."
 - "That's not something I would do, and you know it."
 - "What are you talking about? I'm so confused."
- **ATTACK:** Here the manipulator goes on the offensive, typically with attack on your memory, intelligence, motivation, mental health, character, or emotional stability. This can sound like:
 - "You're overreacting. Stop being so sensitive."
 - "You're imagining things. What's wrong with you?"
 - "You're not thinking clearly. This isn't normal behavior."
 - "Calm down! You always get so dramatic about everything."
 - "Why can't you take a joke? You have no sense of humor."
 - "You're acting unstable and out of control."
 - "Everyone was right about you."
 - "You always do this and it's getting really old."
 - "You're obviously crazy."
- **REVERSE VICTIM & OFFENDER:** At this point, your role is shifted, and you are made to feel like the manipulator or the attacker. The manipulator takes on a victim role and you (i.e., the true victim) are made to feel like YOU did something to HIM. There is no accountability for his actions, and you can easily end up in tears from the sheer frustration — but this may make things worse. This can sound like:
 - "You know how hard I've been working, how can you do this to me? "
 - "After everything I've done for us — I'm the only one fighting for this relationship."
 - "You know how much I love you and you treat me like this."
 - "I can't do anything right in your eyes. I try but you always find something wrong."
 - "All you do is bully me! This really hurts, I don't know if I can take much more of this."
 - "When our friends/family hear about this, they're going to be so upset. You're really letting everyone down."

CONCLUSION

D.A.R.V.O. leaves people feeling confused and terrible about themselves. Also, it's quite possible you've been "giving in" to the manipulation and withdrawing your initial complaints, maybe even comforting the manipulator, because you couldn't see another way to avoid conflict. No matter what, the most important thing is to be kind to yourself, and try not to shame and blame yourself — you don't deserve it. Also, the best thing you can do for yourself is counseling, first to help you understand what is happening in your relationship, and then to formulate a plan for moving forward. If you choose to stay in the relationship, you

can learn how to express yourself to your partner while controlling your reactivity to his manipulation tactics, and ideally you'll be able to prevent conflict from escalating — or leave before it starts. When you feel stronger and more self-assured, you will be able to handle his behavior with assertiveness and neutrality.

WHAT TO DO?

It's not advisable to start using these suggestions without first getting some professional support. As mentioned, narcissists are prone to outbursts of temper called **rages**, specifically when they feel backed in to a corner, or when they believe their needs are being threatened. Again, the best course of action is to find a therapist you connect with — they will assess your particular situation and make sure you're equipped with the best tools to deal with it effectively. With all that said, here is an effective ways to deal with D.A.R.V.O. when it cannot be avoided:

1. Start out with realistic expectations — narcissists are simply not capable of seeing your perspective or point of view, so recognize that compromise is out of the question.
2. Figure out what you're hoping to accomplish — if it's just to "win," you're headed for disaster.
3. The best-case scenario is to say your piece with confidence and as little emotion as possible.
4. If you stick around after you've done that, don't try to convince him, don't let him bait you.
5. Just keep repeating your truth: "You told me you would _____, and then you went back on your word. That hurts my feelings and makes me sad. I wish you wouldn't do that again, but that's up to you. I just wanted you to know that."
6. Then, no matter what he says, just keep repeating, "I already explained everything to you. My feelings are valid. We don't have to agree."

To summarize: lower your expectations, speak your piece, and then leave the scene as soon as possible. It may be just that simple -- or it may not. Manipulative people tend to be unpredictable and moody, and may even use their anger like a weapon. No matter the situation, it's usually wise to hope for the best, but expect the worst -- stay safe and good luck!

For more information, here are some helpful videos:

Video 1 - What is DARVO?

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=2eQIbaNTJHE&feature=shared>

Video 2 - How to handle it?

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=WF-ZevEXVu8&feature=shared>