COLLECTION

The Essentials of Applied Psychology

When Everything Turns Against You

Spotting DARVO and Protecting Your Boundaries



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Disclaimer: This book is a tool for information and personal development.
It is in no way a substitute for professional therapeutic care.

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Introduction — When a Conversation Leaves You More Confused Than Before

You went in looking for an explanation. All you wanted was to say what had hurt you, or to ask a simple question about something you had noticed. You had prepared your words; you may even have rehearsed the sentence in your head. And by the end of the conversation, you walk away with the feeling that you are the one who behaved badly. You are no longer quite sure what happened, nor how the subject you wanted to raise vanished from the conversation, replaced by your own shortcomings, your tone, your memory, your character.

This book starts from that precise experience. It has had a name since 1997: DARVO, an acronym for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. The psychologist Jennifer Freyd, a professor at the University of Oregon, first set it out in an article on her theory of betrayal trauma (Freyd, 1997). The term was initially used to describe a common reaction among people confronted with accusations of sexual violence or of institutional abuse of power. It has since been taken up well beyond that original context — in conversations between partners, at family meals that go wrong, in meetings at work where a professional disagreement suddenly turns into a matter of personality.

This is not an academic text on DARVO. It is a practical guide to help you do three things, in this order: recognise the pattern when it happens, without seeing it everywhere it is not; understand what it does to you, so that you can stop asking what is wrong with you; and choose a response — a boundary to set, a timeline to keep, an exit from the exchange — that does not depend on convincing the other person that they are wrong.

What this book does not do

This needs saying before anything else, because it is the point on which it is easiest to go wrong — including for the author of a book on the subject.

This book does not diagnose the person you are talking to. Spotting a denial, an attack, a reversal in a conversation tells you nothing about the personality of the person producing them, and certainly not that they must be "a narcissist" or "a manipulator" — labels this book deliberately avoids, because they belong to the register of informal diagnosis, not to that of observing a specific behaviour, at a specific moment, in a specific exchange.

This book proves nothing about the past. This may be the single most important idea in the whole book, and it comes directly from the woman who coined the concept. Jennifer Freyd puts it this way on her professional website: using DARVO in the present can be held against someone as such — it is an observable behaviour, with a measured effect on the person exposed to it — but it proves absolutely nothing about whether the original accusation was true. A person can rightly deny something they did not do. A person who has been wrongly accused can also feel attacked and sincerely see themselves as the victim of an unfair accusation. If you take away a single sentence from this book, let it be this one: spotting DARVO does not tell you who is right about the substance of the disagreement.

This book does not hand you lines to recite. You will find no script here along the lines of "here is exactly what to say when someone does this to you". For two reasons. First, because a sentence learnt by heart rings false and often turns against the person who says it. Second, and more seriously, because in situations where a verbal disagreement is part of a wider climate of control or violence, a confrontation script can make things worse rather than defuse them. This book gives you principles for wording things and tools for thinking; never a text to recite in a situation whose level of risk may require specialist advice.

This book does not replace professional support where the situation calls for it — the conclusion returns to this point specifically, with concrete ways of finding a resource suited to your own country, rather than a generic number that might not apply to you at all.

Why this subject, and why now

For some years now, the term DARVO has enjoyed a popularity that reaches far beyond its original field of research. You will find it in popular articles, on social media, in online support groups. That popularity has a downside, documented by the very researchers who study the concept: once a word becomes common currency, it can be used with discernment — but also lazily or unfairly, to dismiss in advance any defence the other person might offer. This book sets out to go against that drift: to give you enough precision about the concept to use it with judgement, not to brandish it as a weapon in the next argument.

At the time of writing, empirical research on DARVO remains relatively recent. The first study built specifically to test the pattern dates from 2017 (Harsey, Zurbriggen & Freyd, 2017). Other work has followed, including a study published in 2024 linking the use of DARVO to self-reported sexual harassment behaviours (Harsey, Adams-Clark & Freyd, 2024). Chapter 7 returns to this in detail, with what it contributes and where it stops. This book does not claim to rest on a science as established as a vaccine or a statistical test validated over decades. It rests on what actually exists, with the caution that so young a field of research demands.

How this book was built

It is only fair that you should know where what you are about to read comes from, because a book about the way facts get distorted in conversation owes you transparency about its own.

The book combines a limited research selection, explained in chapter 7 and the bibliography, with composite situations and teaching tools. The September 2026 revision distinguishes findings consulted directly from studies only listed or summarised on the author's research page. Practice observations reported by the author are not scientific measurements or validation of the exercises. Safety guidance is identified separately from studies of DARVO.

The second material is precisely that practice. The people I work with rarely arrive with the word DARVO; they arrive with a conversation that left them confused, a message reread twenty times, a meeting they came out of wondering whether, in the end, they had made the whole thing up. Every example in this book is a composite: several situations brought together, details moved around, first names changed, so that no real person could recognise themselves in it, or be recognised. Each example is flagged as such with the words "Composite example, fictional". That is not a legal precaution; it is information about what you are reading: a typical situation, not a case file.

Finally, this book was reread with one question in mind, chapter after chapter: could this passage be used by someone to silence the person they are talking to? Every time the answer was yes, the passage was rewritten. A book that teaches you to spot a manoeuvre can, in the wrong hands or simply in the heat of the moment, become a manoeuvre in its turn. Chapter 5, devoted to what is not DARVO, and the sixth question of its reflection checklist, which concerns your own way of voicing a grievance, are there for that reason.

If you are reading this book to understand the other person rather than yourself

Many readers open a book like this one with a specific person in mind. They want to know whether what that person does to them has a name, whether others have been through it, whether it is serious. That is a legitimate expectation, and this book meets it in part: yes, it has a name; yes, others have been through it; as for how serious it is, chapter 6 will help you place it.

But you should be warned of a possible disappointment. This book will not tell you what the other person thinks, what they want, or why they do what they do. Not out of discretion, but because nobody knows that from outside a conversation — not even a professional who has heard only one of the two people involved. What this book can do is make you more precise about what you observed, steadier in the face of the effect it has on you, and freer in the response you choose. Those are three things that belong entirely to you, whatever the other person decides.

It also happens that a reader recognises, as the chapters go by, some of their own reactions in the examples — a denial of degree here, an attack on character there, in an argument they are not proud of. That is a valuable reading, perhaps the most useful of all. DARVO is not a category of people; it is a sequence of responses that any of us can slide into on a day of tiredness or fear. Spotting it in yourself is not a condemnation; it is the beginning of a different conversation.

Who this book is for

For you, if a recent conversation — with a partner, a parent, a brother or sister, a colleague or a manager — left you feeling that you had lost the thread of what you wanted to say, and that you walked away carrying more reproaches than you had brought. You do not need to be certain that DARVO took place for this book to be useful to you: it gives you tools to examine the question, not a ready-made conclusion.

Nor do you need the other person to agree to read this book, still less to accept the diagnosis it does not make. This book is addressed to you, not to the person you are talking to, and the tools it offers — keeping a timeline, telling fact from interpretation, wording a boundary — are things you can do on your own, whatever the other person thinks of them.

How to read this book

Chapters 1 to 4 set out the DARVO pattern in detail, step by step. Chapter 5 is probably the most important one if you are in a hurry: it deals with what is not DARVO, so that the first disagreement that comes along does not get labelled as such. Chapter 6 distinguishes a one-off DARVO from established coercive control, a distinction that protects against two opposite excesses. Chapter 7 takes stock of the research. Chapters 8 to 12 are the toolkit chapters: what the pattern does to you, how to tell facts from opinions, how to keep a timeline, set a boundary, choose an exit from the exchange. Chapters 13 to 15 apply those tools to three specific settings — couples, families, work — whose constraints are not the same.

Each chapter ends with a summary in a few key points, then with a written exercise. These are not exercises to be done in your head: putting things into words, on paper or on a screen, is itself part of the work, because it forces you out of the verbal flow of the very conversation that made you lose your footing. If you do only one exercise, do the one in chapter 9: everything else in the book follows from it.