



DARVO: Understanding a gaslighting strategy of reversing blame

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Deny

Attack

Reverse

Victim

Offender

Most of us don't enter relationships thinking about gaslighting or about emotional abuse strategies. Instead, we often enter relationships with hope for what a new relationship can bring. Partners of sex addicts are no exception: They frequently find a partner who is charming, loving, and maybe even doting... at first... Yet, all too often what starts with life and love in a relationship where sex addiction is present devolves over time into a relationship wracked with hopelessness and despair. How does a relationship get there? How does a partner end up feeling like the source of all the problems in a relationship to the point where she/he is walking on eggshells perpetually around their partner or is too afraid to speak up for her/his own wants and needs? How does the addict start out as the perpetrator and end up so quickly playing the role of victim?

One pattern we often see in these types of relationship is DARVO. Jennifer Freyd (1997) first began using this term to address power dynamics in relationships where betrayal trauma is present. DARVO is an acronym used to describe a pattern of emotional abuse sometimes present in relationships. In situations when one member of the relationship wants to obfuscate the reality of the

other to preserve an active addiction, we see DARVO showing up in relationships. As you can imagine, when sex addiction is present, the addict wants to keep his/her secret at all costs. He/she may not even know they're using this strategy, but it's a way to keep his/her partner in the dark about the REAL reality of the behavior the addict is truly engaged in. DARVO is a way that an addict gaslights his or her partner, shifting blame from self to the other. Before we look further into this concept, let's briefly explain what gaslighting is. Gaslighting is a strategy where a person attacks the intuition or truth of another, making that person feel crazy. It's a strategy, sometimes conscious sometimes unconscious, where the offending party takes the focus from him or herself and places the focus on the other. DARVO is one way that the offending party gaslights their partner.

LET'S BREAK DOWN THIS PATTERN...

D in DARVO stands for **DENY**.

Typically, this relationship dynamic starts with the partner finding something, intuiting something, or suspecting something. The partner shares her/his suspicions with the addict. Again, these suspicions could be direct evidence (e.g., pictures, text messages, online profiles etc.) or intuitions (e.g., feeling like something is "off," confused by the addict's irritability or erratic behavior, stories not lining up, etc.). But either way, the partner brings this up with the addict, only to be met with a denial, such as "You're imagining things," "What are you talking about?" or the addict could then move into the next phase of this dynamic by stating something like, "I can't believe you'd even think that!" or "What were you doing snooping around in my phone for?"

This leads us to the **A** in the DARVO dynamic: **ATTACK**.

After the denial, the addict will make an attack. This could be subtle, "I'm not sure what you're talking about – I love you so much I couldn't even imagine doing _____," or not so subtle, "What's wrong with you? You've got some serious trust issues. Take a look at YOURSELF for once." Either way, the blame gets shifted back to the partner.

This then moves us into the **R** in the DARVO dynamic: **REVERSE**.

We can see that the addict is now starting to shift attention from him/herself to the partner. What may have come as a simple question from the partner may get turned into an onslaught from the addict. The original question or suspicion becomes clouded now, as the addict moves into the victim role.

As the addict shifts focus from him/herself to the partner he/she now becomes the **VICTIM**, the **V** in this dynamic.

He/she may express this posture in a number of ways. He/she may come across as hurt and wounded, enlisting the partner as a supportive rescuer; withdraw/retreat from the partner out of offense from the question/suspicion/accusation; or become angry/hostile/aggressive in their attack against their partner. Regardless of how the addict expresses the victim role, the partner shifts from being the confused, hurt, angry party to the supporter or perpetrator in the dynamic.

By this point, the partner has become the **OFFENDER**, the **O** in DARVO.

The partner now is the “bad guy” and has to justify her/himself and their behaviors, apologize for what they said, thought, or did, console the addict because of the insult, or brace for an attack.

As you can see, this dynamic is devastating in relationships. It’s a gaslighting strategy that shifts focus from the addict’s behaviors to those of the partner. It may start off very subtle in relationships, but it can ultimately escalate into a destructive power dynamic in relationships struggling with the impact of sex addiction.

We’ve found that gaslighting is often not a conscious strategy on the addict’s part. They are concerned with preserving their relationship with their addiction(s) at all costs, and therefore are threatened by their partners coming near the truth. That said, whether this dynamic is intentional or reactive, the impact on the partner and on the relationship is extremely deleterious.

If you’re a partner who is recognizing this pattern in your own relationship, just know that truth is the first step towards healing. Make sure you find safe, supportive professionals around you who can help you understand betrayal trauma and the impact of emotional/psychological abuse on you and on your relationship. A specialist trained through www.APSATS.org can be a helpful place to start, as can someone who is a Certified Sex Addiction Therapist who utilizes the Multidimensional Partner Trauma Model in their professional work.

If you’re reading this and you recognize that you’ve been doing this DARVO strategy in your relationship, make sure you get some professional help to address this. Often times, 12-step communities focus solely on sobriety from sexual behaviors, and these patterns of emotional and psychological abuse do not get addressed. We’ve found that for effective healing of yourself and your relationship you will need to address these patterns, as they are all part of the intimacy problem that leads to and is expressed by sex addiction. There is hope, but you will need to work to take responsibility for your behaviors, and to build openness, honesty, and empathy with your partner. We recognize that learning about ways that we perpetrate pain and abuse on our partners can bring up pain and shame. We do think healing is possible if you’re willing to change, so we support your courageous attempt at recognizing these strategies in yourself and beginning to change them with the help of a safe, supportive guide. Recognition of the problem is the first step towards healing, so we commend you for taking that brave first step.

We understand that it can be really painful to read something like this, but our goal is to provide truth so that you can heal – yourself, your partner, and your relationship(s). If there’s any way we can support you on your journey, please let us know by reaching out to us at info@banantherapy.com or (818) 435-7847.