

DARVO: Why Abusers Accuse Their Victims of Lying

SEO Title Tag: *What Is DARVO? Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim & Offender | Love Psychotherapy*

Meta Description: *DARVO — Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender — explains why abusers so often accuse their victims of false accusations, and why false reports are rarer than assumed.*

Suggested URL Slug: */blog/darvo-abusers-accusing-victims*

Target Keyword: *DARVO false accusation abuse*

Quick Takeaways

- DARVO stands for Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender — a well-documented response pattern among people confronted about abuse.
- Research shows false reports of sexual assault are rare, around 2-10 percent, comparable to other crimes — not the common occurrence public perception assumes.
- DARVO is effective because it recruits bystanders and redirects scrutiny onto the accuser's credibility rather than the facts.
- Close-knit kink and LGBTQ+ communities are especially vulnerable to convincing reversal narratives from socially established members.
- Naming the pattern itself, documenting contemporaneously, and seeking support not contingent on 'winning' the narrative all help survivors navigate a DARVO response.

One of the most disorienting experiences a survivor can have isn't the original harm — it's what happens afterward, when naming that harm gets met with the person responsible loudly, publicly, and convincingly recasting themselves as the one who was actually wronged. This pattern has a name in trauma research: DARVO, short for Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender, coined by psychologist Jennifer Freyd. Understanding it doesn't undo the disorientation, but it does make it recognizable — and recognizing a pattern is the first step in not being destabilized by it.

What DARVO Actually Describes

- **Deny:** the person responsible denies the behavior occurred at all, or denies that it was harmful, often with real confidence and consistency — confidence that's frequently mistaken for a marker of truthfulness, even though it isn't one.
- **Attack:** rather than addressing the substance of what's being raised, the response targets the credibility, character, mental health, or motives of the person raising it — painting them as unstable, vindictive, attention-seeking, or dishonest.
- **Reverse Victim and Offender:** the person responsible frames themselves as the actual victim of the situation — of a smear campaign, a false accusation, an unfair pile-on — inverting the roles so that naming harm becomes, in their retelling, the harmful act itself.

Freyd's research found this pattern to be common specifically among people confronted about sexual violence and abuse, and found that it's often genuinely effective: witnesses and bystanders exposed to a DARVO response were measurably more likely to disbelieve or blame the original victim, even when the underlying facts hadn't changed at all. The tactic works because it exploits a reasonable instinct — wanting to hear both sides — and weaponizes it against the person who was actually harmed.

Why False Accusations Are Rarer Than DARVO Makes Them Feel

Part of what makes DARVO effective is that it plays into a cultural assumption that false accusations of sexual abuse are common. Research consistently finds the opposite: multiple large-scale studies estimate the

rate of false reports of sexual assault at somewhere between 2 and 10 percent — comparable to false report rates for other serious crimes, not meaningfully higher. The person loudly proclaiming they've been falsely accused is, statistically, far more likely to be someone actually responsible for harm deploying a denial tactic than someone genuinely on the receiving end of a rare false report. That statistical reality doesn't mean every accusation is automatically true — but it does mean the base-rate assumption many people carry is backwards.

Why Abusers Reach for This Pattern Specifically

- **It redirects scrutiny:** instead of the specifics of what happened being examined, the conversation shifts to litigating the accuser's credibility and motives — a much harder thing for observers to evaluate fairly, and a much easier place for the person responsible to sow doubt.
- **It recruits bystanders:** a convincing reversal narrative gives friends, family, and community members a reason to rally around the person responsible, often producing exactly the isolation and public doubt that makes it harder for the original survivor to be believed or supported.
- **It exploits real complexity:** relationships genuinely are complicated, and reasonable people know that. DARVO leans on that reasonable epistemic humility, using "it's complicated" or "there are two sides" as cover for a much less complicated reality: harm occurred, and is being denied.

How This Shows Up in Kink and LGBTQ+ Communities Specifically

Close-knit communities are particularly vulnerable to DARVO's bystander-recruitment effect, since reputation and social standing move quickly through shared social circles, events, and online spaces. A person with more community tenure, more social capital, or more public visibility can often mount a more convincing reversal narrative than a newer or less visible community member can push back against — which is part of why the missing stair problem, discussed elsewhere on this site, persists even in communities that genuinely value consent and safety. Someone accused of a consent violation publicly reframing the situation as harassment or a smear campaign against them is, unfortunately, a very familiar shape in these spaces.

What This Means If You're Being DARVO'd

- **Recognize the pattern, don't just argue the specifics:** naming "this is a DARVO response" to a trusted person can sometimes land more clearly than re-litigating every individual claim, because it shifts the conversation to the tactic itself rather than getting lost in the details it's designed to obscure.
- **Expect the reversal to be convincing to some people:** this isn't a reflection of your credibility or the strength of your account — it's a reflection of how effective this specific tactic is documented to be, regardless of the underlying truth.
- **Document contemporaneously:** dates, screenshots, and specific accounts written down close to when things happened hold up better, both to yourself and to anyone else, than memory alone once a reversal narrative is actively being pushed.
- **Get support that isn't contingent on winning the narrative battle:** a therapist, advocate, or support group can hold your experience as real regardless of how the public or community version of events shakes out — which matters, because DARVO situations don't always resolve cleanly or quickly.

What This Means If You're Trying to Support Someone

If someone in your life is on the receiving end of a loud, convincing reversal narrative from the person they say harmed them, resist the urge to fully resolve your own uncertainty before offering support. You don't need to litigate every detail to offer basic care, and "I don't know exactly what happened, but I'm not going to

treat you as guilty of causing your own harm" is a genuinely supportive stance — one that doesn't require you to have picked a side in a public dispute you may not have full visibility into.

Want support with this in your own relationship or practice?

Love Psychotherapy, LLC offers LGBTQ+-affirming, sex-positive, neurodivergent-owned clinical care and life coaching, with telehealth available nationally across thirteen states. Reach out to schedule a consultation.

Well wishes. 🙏

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Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist | Buddhist Chaplain

Pronouns: They/Them

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National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233. National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673. If you are having thoughts of suicide, call or text 988.

National Resources:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline — <https://www.thehotline.org>
- RAINN (National Sexual Assault Hotline) — <https://www.rainn.org>
- The Network/La Red (LGBTQ+ and kink-aware) — <https://www.tnlr.org>
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — <https://988lifeline.org>

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