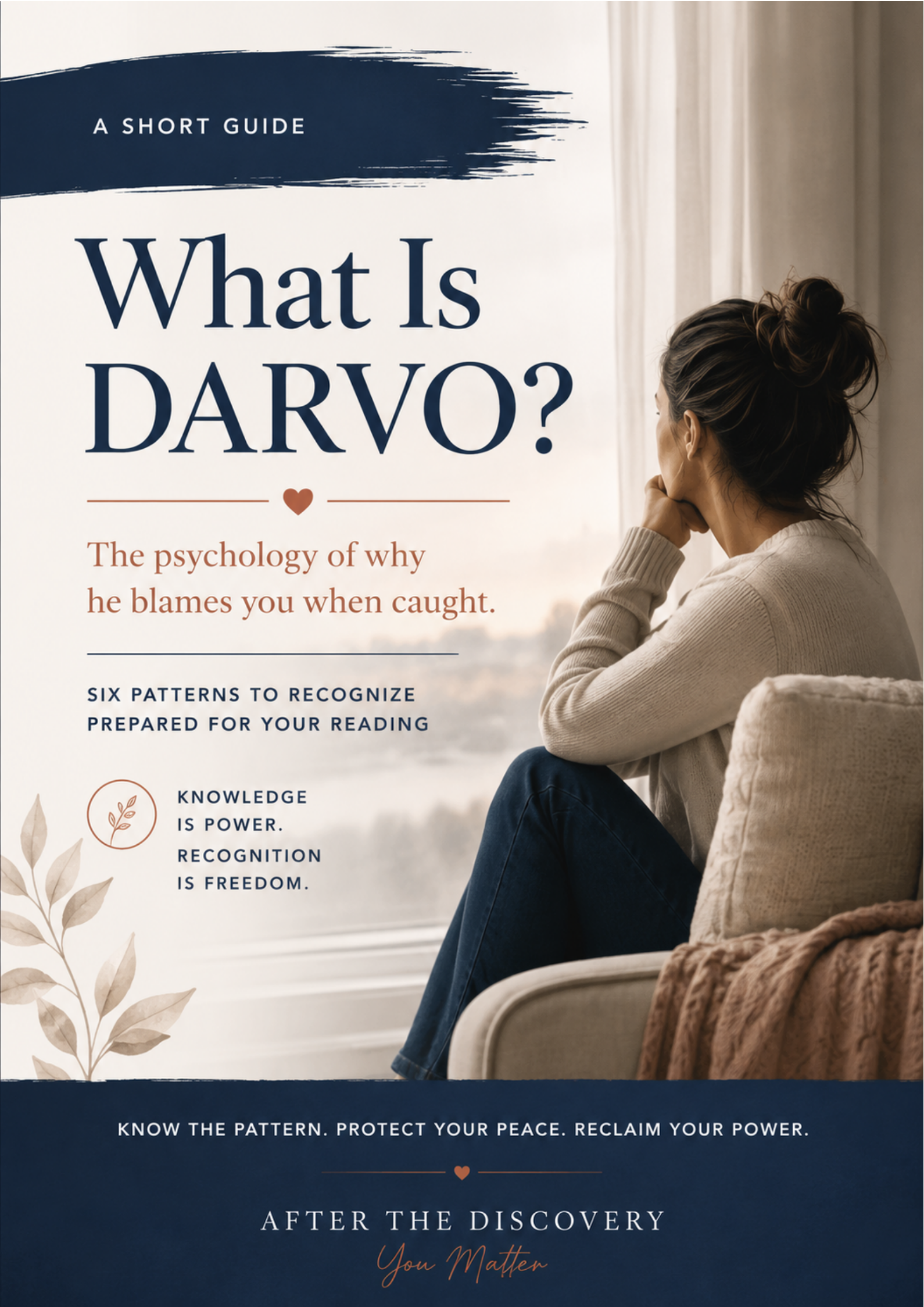




A SHORT GUIDE

What Is DARVO?



The psychology of why
he blames you when caught.

SIX PATTERNS TO RECOGNIZE
PREPARED FOR YOUR READING



KNOWLEDGE
IS POWER.
RECOGNITION
IS FREEDOM.

KNOW THE PATTERN. PROTECT YOUR PEACE. RECLAIM YOUR POWER.



AFTER THE DISCOVERY
You Matter

BEFORE WE START

You caught him. You had the messages, the timeline, the receipts. You walked into that conversation as the person who'd been wronged, and somehow, you walked out of it apologizing.

If that sequence sounds familiar, you've experienced DARVO: **D**eny, **A**ttack, **R**everse **V**ictim and **O**ffender. It's a documented psychological pattern, first named in 1997 by psychologist Dr. Jennifer Freyd of the University of Oregon, whose research on betrayal trauma has shaped how clinicians understand the aftermath of abuse.

This guide breaks the pattern into six moves, so you can recognize it in real time, instead of only understanding it in hindsight.

This guide discusses manipulation tactics used in abusive and betrayal dynamics, including infidelity, gaslighting, and emotional abuse. If any of this feels close to home, know that support is available, and you don't have to sort through it alone.

01

I have a name for it now: DARVO, Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender.

DARVO isn't a personality quirk or a one-off bad reaction. It plays out in three moves: confronted with evidence, he denies it happened. When denial doesn't hold, he attacks your character, your motives, your credibility. And when that attack lands, the roles quietly reverse, the person who did the harming becomes the one who was hurt.

Research backs up how common this is. In one widely cited study, roughly seven in ten people who had done something harmful used DARVO-style tactics when confronted about it, in relationships, workplaces, and institutions alike.

The exchange can move fast. Sometimes all three moves happen inside a single two-minute conversation. Deny, attack, and reverse aren't really three separate incidents, they're one continuous sequence, each stage buying time until the subject has changed completely and the evidence you walked in with is no longer what's being discussed.

IN PRACTICE

You: "I found the messages. I know what's been happening.", *you open with the evidence*

Him: "Nothing happened. You're seeing something that isn't there.", *deny*

Him: "And you've been going through my phone? That's a massive breach of trust.", *attack*

Him: "I can't believe you'd do that to me, after everything I've given you.", *reverse*

THINGS YOU MAY HEAR

"That never happened. You're imagining things."

"You've got some nerve going through my stuff."

"I can't believe you're accusing me of this again."

"You're twisting this into something it's not."

"I don't even recognize you when you're like this."

02

I get blamed faster than he ever takes accountability.

Real accountability is slow and uncomfortable. It requires processing what he did, sitting with the weight of it, and tolerating the discomfort of having hurt someone he claims to love.

Blame-shifting skips all of that. "Why were you on my phone?" takes far less effort than "I lied to you for three years." One is a reflex. The other is a reckoning. Given the choice, a mind organized around self-protection almost always takes the reflex.

Psychologists distinguish between guilt ("I did something bad") and shame ("I am something bad"). Accountability requires tolerating guilt. But for someone whose sense of self depends on being the good guy, admitting wrongdoing can trigger shame instead, and shame is intolerable enough that the mind will reach for almost anything else, including blaming you, to avoid sitting in it.

IN PRACTICE

Within the first thirty seconds of being confronted, the conversation is already about you, your snooping, your trust issues, your inability to "let things go." The clock has already run out on the actual conversation you tried to start, and you're now defending your own behavior instead.

THINGS YOU MAY HEAR

"Why are you always digging for something?"

"You broke my trust the moment you went snooping."

"Can we not do this right now? You're overreacting."

"You're making this way bigger than it needs to be."

"I don't have to explain myself for every little thing."

03

I'm treated like finding out was the real betrayal.

This is the part that defies logic: he often isn't consciously lying when he attacks you for confronting him. To him, it can genuinely feel true.

Psychologists call this compartmentalization, a defense where behavior that conflicts with someone's self-image gets mentally sealed off. In his framework, the betrayal exists behind a door he never intended for you to open. When you find the evidence, what registers first isn't his guilt, it's the violation of you opening that door.

This isn't a clinical diagnosis, and it isn't an excuse, it's a description of a defense mechanism, and defense mechanisms can coexist with full knowledge that what he did was wrong. He can know, on some level, that the affair was a betrayal, while simultaneously experiencing your discovery of it as the more immediate threat. Both things are true for him at once, which is part of what makes the reaction feel so genuine, because to him, in that moment, it is.

IN PRACTICE

He may seem more rattled by "how did you find this" than by what you actually found. The question of access, your snooping, your search history, who tipped you off, can dominate the entire conversation, because in his internal accounting, that's the door that mattered.

THINGS YOU MAY HEAR

"That part of my life has nothing to do with you."

"You had no right to go looking for that."

"I don't know why you're making this bigger than it is."

"You went looking for trouble and now you've found it."

"This is exactly why I can't have any privacy."

04

My reaction becomes the subject, not his actions.

The moment you cry, raise your voice, or show visible distress, the conversation quietly changes subject, from what he did, to how you're reacting to what he did.

"I can't talk to you when you're like this" turns your grief into the problem to be managed. This is a well-documented feature of gaslighting: by making your emotional reaction the focus, he creates a reason to end the conversation, and his behavior never gets addressed.

This is sometimes called tone policing, redirecting attention from what was said to how it was said. Crying, raising your voice, or struggling to stay composed are normal responses to betrayal, not evidence that you're overreacting. But over time, being told your reactions are "too much" can train you to soften them preemptively, which only makes it easier for the real issue to go unaddressed the next time too.

IN PRACTICE

"I was going to explain, but not while you're yelling at me", a sentence that sounds reasonable in isolation, but that, in this pattern, functions as a way to make sure the explanation never actually has to happen.

THINGS YOU MAY HEAR

"I can't have this conversation while you're crying."

"You're being way too emotional right now."

"See, this is exactly why I don't tell you things."

"I'll talk about it when you've calmed down."

"You always do this, turn everything into a fight."

05

I end up comforting the person who hurt me.

"Do you know how it feels to be accused like this?" Now you're offering comfort to the person who broke your trust, because his feelings about being caught have been positioned as more urgent than your feelings about being betrayed.

Researchers have found this reversal doesn't just affect the two people in the room, outside observers who witness a DARVO-style response tend to see the perpetrator as more sympathetic, and the actual victim as less credible.

This is part of why DARVO can be so isolating. If he tells a mutual friend, or even your own family, a version of events where he's the wronged party, you may find yourself not just managing his reaction, but everyone else's too, explaining, re-explaining, defending a version of events you didn't create in the first place.

IN PRACTICE

A friend later says, "He seemed really upset, are you sure you're not being too hard on him?" And now you're fielding doubt from someone who wasn't even in the room.

THINGS YOU MAY HEAR

"Do you know how humiliating this is for me?"

"I'm the one who's been through hell here."

"You're punishing me for something I'm already dealing with."

"Nobody's perfect, why are you acting like I'm a monster?"

"I already feel bad enough, you don't need to pile on."

06

I know this will happen again, every time I confront him.

Not because he's a cartoonish villain. Because his mind has developed a self-protective response that is, quite literally, optimized to defend the behavior at the cost of the relationship, and defense mechanisms don't retire themselves just because they've been named.

Until that pattern is genuinely examined, ideally with professional support, the sequence will likely repeat. Recognizing DARVO doesn't stop it from happening. But it gives you language for what's occurring in real time, so you can notice the reversal as it starts.

Breaking the cycle usually requires two separate things: accountability work on his part, ideally individual therapy focused on the behavior itself, rather than a joint session where the same pattern can simply replay in front of a counselor, and support on yours, so you have somewhere to process what's happened that isn't inside the same conversation where the reversal keeps occurring.

IN PRACTICE

A useful boundary is separating the two conversations entirely: one where you state what you know and what you need, and a separate space, a friend, a therapist, a journal, where you process how it felt. Keeping those apart makes it much harder for the reversal to hijack both at once.

THINGS YOU MAY HEAR

"We've already been through this, why bring it up again?"

"I said I was sorry, what more do you want from me?"

"You're never going to let this go, are you?"

"Can we just move on already?"

"Every time things are good, you bring this back up."

IF THIS SOUNDS LIKE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Naming the pattern is powerful, but it isn't a fix on its own, and it's not something you're required to untangle by yourself. A therapist or counselor experienced in relational or betrayal trauma can help you separate what's actually your responsibility from what's been placed there.

It's worth saying, too, that recognizing this pattern is about protecting your own clarity, not about diagnosing him. DARVO describes a pattern of behavior, not a fixed character or a formal condition. What matters most going forward is whether he's willing to do the accountability work, and whether you have support of your own while you find out.

SUPPORT IN AUSTRALIA

1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) offers free, confidential support around relationship abuse and coercive control, 24 hours a day, every day.

Sources: Freyd, J. J. (1997) and subsequent research from the Freyd Lab, University of Oregon, on DARVO and betrayal trauma; Harsey & Freyd, "Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender (DARVO): What Is the Influence on Perceived Perpetrator and Victim Credibility?" *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* (2020).

RESOURCES & SUPPORT FOR WIVES AFTER PORN OR SEX ADDICTION DISCOVERY

What We Offer



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A Note From Me



I'm a wife who has walked this road.
I know the shock, the questions, the pain and the confusion.
I created After the Discovery to offer the support and resources I wish I had when my world changed.

Everything here comes from lived experience, deep research and a whole lot of heart.

You are not alone. ❤️



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