

DARVO Response Protocol

Professional Response Guide

Overview

DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender) is a manipulation tactic commonly used when someone is confronted about harmful behavior. Recognizing and responding appropriately in session is critical for client safety and progress.

Recognizing DARVO in Session

- **D - Deny:** Client or their partner flatly denies reported behavior despite evidence.
- **A - Attack:** Confronted person attacks credibility, character, or motives of accuser.
- **RVO - Reverse:** Confronted person claims victimhood; original victim portrayed as abuser.

Common Phrases That Signal DARVO:

- "That never happened." / "You're remembering it wrong."
- "Why are you always attacking me?" / "You're the abusive one."
- "I can't believe you'd accuse me of this. Do you know how hurtful that is?"
- "Everyone can see you're the problem, not me."

In-Session Responses

When You Observe DARVO:

1. Name the pattern neutrally: "I'm noticing a shift in this conversation. Let's slow down."
2. Redirect to original concern: "Let's return to the specific situation that was raised."
3. Validate the original speaker: "[Name], you started to share something. I want to make sure we hear that."
4. Interrupt escalation: "We're going to pause here. This pattern isn't productive."

When Your Client Reports DARVO Outside Session:

- **Validate:** "What you're describing is a recognized manipulation pattern."
- **Educate:** Briefly explain DARVO without pathologizing the partner if couples work continues.
- **Document:** Note the report and pattern for your records.
- **Strategize:** Help client prepare for future occurrences.

De-escalation Scripts

Neutral Interruption:

"I'm going to pause us here. We've moved away from the original topic in a way that's making this conversation less productive."

Direct Naming (when appropriate):

"What's happening right now is a pattern where the person who raised a concern ends up defending themselves instead. That's not useful for either of you."

Individual Follow-up:

"I noticed something in our session I want to check in about. How did you feel when the conversation shifted to focus on your behavior instead of the concern you raised?"

Safety Considerations

- Persistent DARVO may indicate deeper characterological issues requiring specialized work.
- Consider whether couples work is appropriate if one partner consistently uses DARVO.
- Victims of chronic DARVO may need individual work to rebuild reality-testing.
- Document patterns for potential safety planning.

Reference: Freyd, J.J. (1997). *Violations of power, adaptive blindness, and betrayal trauma theory*. *Feminism & Psychology*.