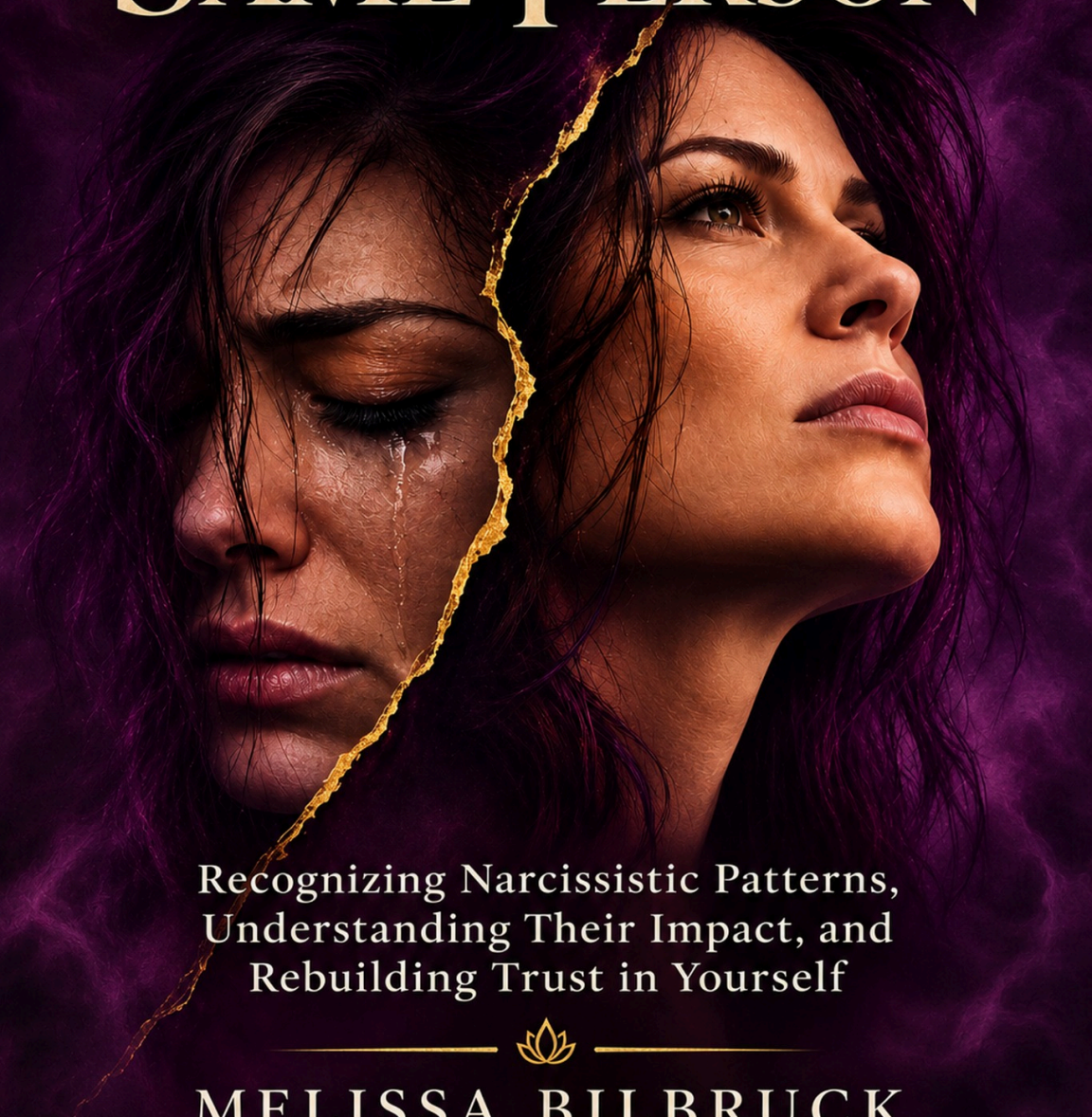
The Two Faces of the Same Person



Recognizing Narcissistic Patterns, Understanding Their Impact, and Rebuilding Trust in Yourself

MELISSA BILBRUCK

TORCH & SOUL

THE TWO FACES OF THE SAME PERSON

Recognizing Narcissistic Patterns, Understanding Their Impact, and Rebuilding Trust in Yourself

By Melissa Bilbruck

Torch & Soul

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Torch & Soul
torchandsoul.com

IMPORTANT NOTE FOR READERS

This book is educational and draws on lived experience and published research. I am not a therapist, psychologist, physician, or attorney. This book is not a diagnosis, treatment plan, or substitute for individualized medical, mental health, legal, or safety advice. Recognizing harmful patterns does not establish that someone has a personality disorder. You do not need a diagnosis to take harmful behavior seriously. Laws and available services vary by location. Seek qualified local support for your circumstances.

IF YOU NEED HELP NOW

If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services (911 in the United States) as soon as you can safely do so. Do not wait to finish this book or make a safety plan. If you are experiencing abuse, you can ask for help even if you are not ready to leave. In the United States, the National Domestic Violence Hotline is available at 1-800-799-7233 or thehotline.org. If your device or accounts may be monitored, use a safer device the other person cannot access when possible. If you are thinking about harming yourself, seek help now. In the United States, call or text 988 for crisis support; if you cannot keep yourself safe, contact emergency services as soon as you can safely do so. Outside the United States, use local emergency and crisis services. Chapter 32 and the Resource Guide provide more information.

DEDICATION

For the ones still in it — trying to make sense of something that was never supposed to make sense.

For the ones who just got out — standing in the quiet, wondering why relief and grief feel like the same thing.

For the ones who have been out for years — and still find themselves returning to the question of how it happened.

I see you.

You are not alone in this. You never were.

This book exists because I lived what you are living. I lived it more than once. And I built Torch & Soul so you would never have to figure it out alone the way I did.

— Melissa

PREFACE

Why I Wrote This Book

I've always believed that what happens to you in life doesn't have to define who you are or determine what your future will be.

And believe me, I've had plenty of experiences that could have made me see things differently.

I grew up in a home filled with abuse and chaos. Back then, I didn't know anything about narcissistic behavior, manipulation, or the names for so many of the things I was experiencing. I just knew what I was living through.

Some of those experiences followed me into adulthood. I've been in relationships that hurt me deeply, including one that broke me in ways I never imagined possible.

But I've also known genuine love, kindness, and people who cared about me.

I've struggled throughout my life, but I've always been independent and determined to find my way. That doesn't mean the things I've been through haven't affected me. They absolutely have. Some things have taken a long time to work through, and some will probably always be part of me.

But they aren't all of who I am.

I still believe there are good people in this world. I still have compassion, even for people who have wronged me. That doesn't mean I excuse their behavior or want them in my life. I can recognize the harm somebody caused without allowing it to change everything I believe about people.

And I believe there's always more to our lives than what we've already been through.

That's part of why Torch & Soul means so much to me.

I started Torch & Soul because I knew I could help people. I've always had a heart for others, and I believe that being able to take what I've

lived through and what I've learned and use it to help somebody else is part of my purpose.

When I began explaining narcissistic behaviors and relationship patterns, I heard from people who were going through things I recognized immediately. People who couldn't understand why the same situations kept happening, why they were always defending themselves, or why somebody could treat them so differently from the way everyone else saw them.

I knew those questions because I'd had them myself.

And I wanted to do more than explain one behavior at a time.

That's why I wrote *The Two Faces of the Same Person.*

I wanted to help people understand the bigger picture. How these patterns connect, why they can be so difficult to recognize when you're living through them, and how those experiences can affect your trust in yourself long after the relationship has changed or ended.

Because I don't want people depending on me to tell them what to think about their lives.

I want them to have the understanding and confidence to make those decisions for themselves.

I can't change what happened in my life, and I can't change what somebody else has experienced.

But I can share what I've learned. I can help people recognize things they haven't been able to explain. And I can remind them that their lives hold more possibilities than the experiences they've been through.

That's why this work matters to me. And that's why I wrote this book.

The greatest light you will ever follow is not ours. It is the one already burning within you.

— Melissa Bilbruck

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INTRODUCTION

The Same Person, Two Experiences

You have probably spent a lot of time trying to figure out who they really are.

The one who held you when you cried and the one who made you cry — are those the same person? The one who told you that you were everything and the one who made you feel like nothing — same person? The one who seemed so safe and the one you became afraid of — same person?

Yes. Same person.

That is the part that breaks people. Not just the cruelty. The confusion. The whiplash. The fact that you can hold two completely opposite experiences of one human being and both of them feel true because both of them *are* true. That is not you losing your mind. That is not you being dramatic or oversensitive or too much. That is what a harmful relationship can look like, including one where narcissistic patterns are present.

And that is what this book is about.

I want to be clear about something before we go any further.

I am not going to diagnose anyone for you. I am not a therapist, and even if I were, diagnosing someone from the outside of a relationship is not something anyone should be doing. What I *am* going to do is walk you through what these patterns look like, what they feel like from inside the relationship, what they do to you over time, and how you find your way back to yourself after.

That last part matters as much as anything else in this book.

Because most of the information out there focuses on them — the narcissist, what they are, why they do what they do. And that information has value. But this book is about *you*. What happened to you. What you are carrying. What it is going to take to put it down.

Here is what I need you to understand about the title.

The Two Faces of the Same Person is not just a description of the person who hurt you. It is a description of the experience — the double reality that many people in these relationships live inside. You are not confused because you are weak or naive or in denial. You are confused because you are living in something that produces confusion — where the signals contradict each other, where the person who hurts you is also the person you love, where things improve just enough to restore your hope before they get hard again. The push and the pull. The warmth and the cold. The apology and then the same thing happening again. That back and forth can become a pattern. And once you can see it — once you have a name for it and can recognize it when it happens — you may begin to take back some of the power it has had over you.

That is what naming things does. It gives you back a little bit of solid ground.

This book is going to take you through the whole picture — from the very beginning all the way to the other side of it.

We start with what narcissism actually is, because that word gets thrown around so much that most people are more confused by it than helped. From there we get into the patterns themselves — what they look like when you grew up inside them, what they look like when you walked into them as an adult, and what it feels like when someone slowly starts taking over your sense of who you are. We talk about why people stay, because that question deserves a real answer, not a judgmental one. We talk about what all of this does to your body and your mind over time, because it causes real damage and you deserve to understand that damage clearly. We talk about how to get safe. And then we talk about healing — not the version of healing that sounds good on paper, but what it actually looks and feels like when you are living it.

We are going to look at how those pieces fit together.

If you grew up in it, this book is for you. If you walked into it as an adult with no warning, this book is for you. If you have been out of it for years and still feel like something is wrong with you, this book is especially for you. And if you are still in it and not sure what to do

next, you are in the right place. But if you are in immediate danger, your safety comes first.

One more thing before we begin.

I am not going to be careful with you. I do not mean that in a harsh way — I mean it in a respectful one. The world has probably spent a lot of time being careful around this topic, tiptoeing around the word narcissism, adding a hundred qualifiers, reminding you that not everyone experiences these things the same way. And all of that is true. But careful doesn't help you. What helps you is someone who will sit down next to you and say *this is what it is* — plainly, directly, in real language you can actually use.

That is what I am here to do.

You have been trying to make sense of something for a long time. Let's make some sense of it together.

— *Melissa*

PART ONE: WHAT YOU'RE ACTUALLY DEALING WITH

Chapter 1 — What Is Narcissism, Really?

Let me put you inside a moment before I explain anything.

You are upset. Something happened — something they did, something they said — and you finally said something about it. Maybe you raised your voice. Maybe you cried. Maybe you said something you wouldn't normally say because you had been holding it in for so long that it finally came out sideways.

And now — somehow — that is what we are talking about.

Not what they did. Not what started this. Not the thing you were actually upset about.

Your reaction.

Why did you have to yell? You can't even have a normal conversation. Look at how you're acting right now.

And you hear yourself saying — *I know I shouldn't have yelled, but —*

Stop right there.

Do you see what just happened? You were the one who got hurt. You reacted to being hurt. And now you are the one explaining yourself. Apologizing. Defending your reaction instead of talking about the thing that caused it.

They didn't have to prove what they did was okay. They just had to make what you did afterward feel worse.

When a conversation repeatedly turns your response into the only issue, that can become a way of avoiding the original harm. Recognizing the pattern can help you respond more clearly — even if it does not make the situation safe or stop it on its own.

That is what this whole book is about. Not just naming the pattern. Putting you inside it so you can see it in real time, while it is happening, before you have already apologized for something that was never your fault.

And to do that — to really see it — you first need to understand what you are actually dealing with. Because most people think they know what narcissism is. Most people are wrong.

Narcissism. You have probably heard it a hundred times. You have probably used it yourself — maybe to describe someone in your life, maybe to try to explain to a friend what you were going through, maybe just lying awake at two in the morning trying to make sense of things.

And yet for a word that gets used this much, most people are genuinely confused about what it actually means. Not because they aren't smart enough to understand it. Because the way it gets talked about — in pop psychology, on social media, in casual conversation — creates more confusion than clarity. Someone calls their difficult coworker a narcissist. Someone calls a politician one. Someone calls their ex a narcissist and their friend says "you can't just call everyone a narcissist." And suddenly you're not even sure what you're talking about anymore.

So before we go anywhere else in this book, we are going to get clear on what this word actually means. What it is. What it isn't. What it looks like in real life versus what it looks like in a clinical definition. And why understanding the difference matters.

What people think narcissism is — and what it actually is

Most people picture a narcissist as someone who is completely in love with themselves. Arrogant. Full of themselves. The person who walks into a room and immediately makes it about them. Who can't stop talking about how great they are. Who looks down on everyone around them.

That picture is not completely wrong. But it is missing the most important part. And the part it's missing is the part that explains everything you have been living through.

Here is what most people never realize: narcissism is not simply someone loving themselves too much. Narcissistic traits can involve entitlement, a strong need for admiration, and difficulty making room

for other people's needs. But those traits alone do not tell you whether someone cares about you, or why they act the way they do.

Read that again.

In some relationships, it can feel as though the other person is more invested in what you provide than in who you are. Your admiration. Your loyalty. Your willingness to stay. Your emotional reactions to them. Your presence. Those things may become the center of the relationship. But no single explanation accounts for every narcissistic trait or every harmful behavior.

In a relationship like that, you can feel so important one moment and so invisible the next. You may be needed for what you give while your own feelings and needs are repeatedly pushed aside. And that distinction — between being needed and being valued — is at the center of everything this book is going to teach you.

The clinical picture

Narcissistic Personality Disorder, or NPD, is a diagnosable mental health condition. It is listed in the DSM — the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders — which is the reference book mental health professionals use to make diagnoses. The DSM-5-TR describes a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy beginning by early adulthood. A clinical diagnosis requires at least five of nine specified criteria, assessed in the wider context of the person's functioning — not a conclusion drawn from one relationship or one difficult interaction.

Here is what I want you to hear about that clinical definition: someone can cause serious harm without ever receiving an NPD diagnosis. And not receiving it does not make what they did to you less real.

There is no way to know from a relationship story alone whether someone would meet the criteria for NPD, or whether they have ever sought an evaluation. What I do know is that many people who have been hurt are the ones searching for answers. The ones trying to understand what happened to them. The ones asking why they can't seem to leave, or why they still miss someone who was so cruel to

them, or why they feel like they lost themselves somewhere along the way.

You do not need to prove that someone has a disorder to take the effects of their behavior seriously.

That said — a diagnosis is not what this book is about, and diagnosing anyone in your life is not something I am going to ask you to do. What matters more than the label is the pattern. And the pattern is what we are going to spend this whole book learning to see clearly.

The spectrum

One of the most important things to understand is that narcissistic traits vary in degree and in how they show up. A spectrum can help us talk about those differences, but it is not a single ladder from confidence to abuse to NPD.

What some people call healthy narcissism is a reasonable level of self-regard, the ability to advocate for yourself, and confidence in your own worth. That is not what we are talking about. That is actually something we want. That is something a lot of survivors have had stripped away from them and have to rebuild.

Some people have significant narcissistic traits without meeting the criteria for NPD. Separately, people can cause serious harm in their relationships with or without those traits. This book describes harmful patterns you can recognize — I cannot assign the people in those examples a place on a clinical spectrum. The harm is real regardless of what a clinician would or wouldn't put on a piece of paper.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a clinical diagnosis, not simply the farthest point on a scale of harmful behavior. Its traits must form a pervasive, clinically significant pattern across contexts; that does not mean every relationship looks the same.

Whatever label someone does or does not fit, repeated harmful behavior can leave you questioning yourself. We can examine that harm without assuming everyone shares the same inner cause.

What actually drives it

Here is where it gets important — and where most explanations fall short.

Most people think narcissism is about arrogance. About genuinely believing you are better than everyone else, superior, deserving of special treatment. And on the surface that can certainly be what it looks like.

Research and clinical observation suggest that vulnerability and difficulty regulating self-esteem can be part of some narcissistic presentations. Criticism may feel especially threatening to some people, and some respond with defensiveness or anger. That does not mean hidden fragility is present in every case, or that it explains every reaction.

Behavior like this can feel confusing and out of proportion. You said something small and they exploded. You expressed a need and they turned it into evidence of your flaws. You asked a simple question and suddenly you were in a full-blown crisis that you didn't start and couldn't stop.

Those reactions can follow a recognizable pattern. In some people, threats to self-esteem or status may play a part. But you cannot know from a single outburst exactly what was happening inside them.

Understanding this does not excuse what they did. Not even close. But it may help you understand one part of the pattern. And once you can see what happened instead of just absorbing the chaos, you can begin questioning the blame you were taught to carry. Whatever was happening inside them was never yours to fix.

The types — because they don't all look the same

One of the reasons people stay confused about narcissism for so long is that the person in their life doesn't match the description they've heard. The description is usually the loud, obviously arrogant, openly contemptuous type — the one who walks into a room and immediately starts talking about themselves, who can't take any criticism, who makes it clear they think they're better than everyone around them.

That type exists. But it is not the only type. And if the person in your life doesn't match that image, it can make you doubt yourself. Maybe they're not really narcissistic. Maybe I'm the problem. Maybe I'm seeing something that isn't there.

Let me walk you through some descriptions you may hear — not as official diagnostic boxes or a validated seven-type system, but as ways people try to describe what they have seen. Researchers study grandiose and vulnerable features, and have also studied communal narcissism. Other labels below are informal shorthand for behavior, not diagnoses.

A grandiose presentation is the one most people picture. Outwardly confident. Openly self-aggrandizing. Expects to be treated as special and doesn't hide that expectation. Can be charming and magnetic in public — the life of the party, the person everyone gravitates toward. In some harmful relationships, contempt or control emerge in private even when the person is charming in public. That public-private difference is something to examine through the behavior itself, not assume from the trait label.

What people call covert narcissism overlaps with descriptions of vulnerable narcissistic traits, but it is not a separate DSM diagnosis. These traits may be less outwardly boastful and can involve sensitivity or grievance. In a harmful relationship, someone may sulk, withdraw, or use guilt in ways that leave you feeling responsible for their suffering. When someone presents as fragile or wounded while repeatedly using withdrawal or guilt, people around them may spend enormous energy trying to help or avoid upsetting them — without knowing why their efforts never seem enough.

Malignant narcissism is an informal clinical term, not an official DSM subtype or a proven ranking of danger. Whatever someone's personality traits, certain behaviors must be recognized for what they are: abuse and serious safety concerns. Physical danger. Stalking. Threats. Cruelty and intimidation that can be frightening whether or not you know the motive behind them. If this is what you have lived through, your experience is real and it is serious — and we will spend significant time in this book on safety, because safety is not a footnote when this is what you are dealing with.

Communal narcissism is a research concept, not an NPD diagnostic subtype. It describes narcissistic self-enhancement expressed through being seen as generous, helpful, or virtuous — a pillar of the community, a devoted volunteer, the person who is always there for others. The wish to be recognized as the most giving, the most moral, or the most selfless can be part of that pattern. In a harmful relationship, that public image of generosity may coexist with resentment or manipulation in private. You have to judge those actions individually.

“Seductive narcissist” is an informal label sometimes used for a pattern of intense romantic attention — it is not a clinical subtype. The attention can feel magnetic. Intensely focused on you — at least in the beginning. They make you feel like the most seen, most wanted, most understood person in the room. The attention they give you in the early stages of the relationship can feel unlike anything you have experienced before. Sometimes the other person seems to reflect your needs back so precisely that it feels like a genuine connection. Later, the intensity may fade. That change can be painful, but it does not, by itself, prove the early attention was a deliberate strategy. You may find yourself chasing the version of them you fell in love with, wondering what you did wrong, wondering which parts of that early connection were lasting.

“High-functioning narcissist” is an informal description, not a diagnosis. A person may be successful, respected, and well-liked in public while someone close to them experiences harmful behavior. They may hold down a career, maintain friendships, and show up to family events. And because their public life appears so normal — so healthy — the harm they cause in private is almost impossible to explain to people who only know the outside version of them. When you try to describe what happens behind closed doors, people don’t believe you. Or they minimize it. Or they tell you that you must be misunderstanding things, because they know this person and this person is wonderful. That gap between the public image and the private reality is one of the most isolating experiences a survivor can have. And that gap can make it harder to be heard.

“Cerebral narcissist” is an informal label for someone whose superiority is expressed through intellect rather than charm or looks — it is not an official subtype. The behavior may center on being seen as the smartest person in the room — and making sure you know it. They may correct you, talk over you, dismiss your opinions as uninformed or simplistic. They can use knowledge and language as weapons, making you feel small and inadequate for not understanding things the way they do. In a relationship like this, you can find yourself constantly second-guessing your own intelligence, deferring to their judgment on everything, and feeling like your perspective simply doesn’t have enough weight to matter. In a controlling relationship, intellect can be used to belittle someone just as effectively as any other tool.

A person may not fit neatly into any of these descriptions, and many are combinations of several. What matters more than the label is the behavior you can observe. In the harmful relationships this book discusses, that may include control, contempt, repeated dismissal, and blame turned back on you. Those are problems worth naming without needing to fit someone into a clinical category.

What narcissism is not

This matters just as much as understanding what it is — because confusion about this keeps a lot of people from trusting their own experience.

Here is something I need you to hear before we go further: narcissism does not always look like someone walking around thinking about how great they are. Sometimes it shows up in repeated grievances. You don’t appreciate me enough. I deserve more than this. Everyone lets me down. When those demands keep placing your needs last, that pattern matters. You can recognize entitlement from what you see and hear without needing to know exactly what is happening inside their mind.

That is a very different thing from what most people imagine when they hear the word narcissist. So let’s clear up what it is not.

Narcissism is not just confidence. A person who knows their worth, advocates for themselves, and doesn’t apologize for taking up space is

not a narcissist. That is actually something healthy. That is something a lot of survivors have had stripped away from them and have to work to get back.

Narcissism is not just selfishness. Everyone is selfish sometimes. We all have moments of putting our own needs first. The difference is that in a person with narcissistic patterns, this is not a momentary lapse — it is a consistent way of operating. In a harmful pattern, your needs and feelings may repeatedly get pushed aside. You can describe that behavior without knowing exactly what they understood or intended.

Narcissism is not just being difficult. Plenty of people are difficult. Plenty of people have big personalities or challenging moments or bad days where they aren't their best selves. That is human. What we are talking about is a pattern — consistent, showing up across situations — not someone who had a rough week.

Narcissism is not just being a bad person. Some people with narcissistic traits may struggle to recognize or respond to the harm they cause. You cannot determine from their behavior alone exactly what they understand. That does not make harmful behavior okay. What matters is whether they take responsibility and show meaningful change over time — not whether you can explain what is happening inside their mind.

And finally — having some narcissistic traits does not make someone a narcissist. All of us have moments of needing validation, protecting our ego, centering ourselves when we shouldn't. The difference between a moment and a pattern is enormous. What we are talking about in this book is the pattern — repeated over time, not inferred from one difficult moment.

Why the word still matters, even with all this complexity

After all of that — after all the caveats about spectrums and types and clinical definitions — you might be wondering why we bother with the word at all.

Here is why.

Because having a name for something changes your relationship to it.

Before you had the word — before you understood what was happening as a recognizable pattern with a name and a mechanism — it was just your life. It was just the relationship you were in. It was just how things were with this person. And without a framework for understanding it, you had nowhere to put what was happening except inside yourself. So that's where it went. Into your self-worth. Into your sense of what you deserved. Into your belief about whether you were the problem.

The word gives you a framework. The framework gives you a way to look at what happened from the outside instead of the inside. And looking at it from the outside — even a little bit, even imperfectly — changes everything.

You are not diagnosing them. You are not making a legal argument. You are not claiming to know the full contents of another person's psychology. You are recognizing a pattern that has a name, and you are using that name to understand your experience rather than to continue absorbing it without explanation.

That is what this chapter is for. That is what this whole book is for.

By the time you finish it, you will have something you may never have had before: a real picture of what happened to you, language for what you lived through, and a foundation for putting it down.

We are just getting started.

In the next chapter, we are going to look at common narcissistic traits — and the patterns of behavior that may show up in relationships — so you can start recognizing them by name. Not in hindsight. Right now, wherever you are.

Chapter 2 — Traits That Show Up Between People

Let me put you inside another moment.

You just finished something. A project, a task, something you both worked on together — or something you mostly carried while they had a hand in it. And now someone is asking about it. A friend, a family member, a coworker. And the person beside you starts talking.

They talk about what they did. What they came up with. How it came together. How they knew it would work.

You are standing right there. You did most of it. And somehow your name doesn't come up. Your contribution shrinks in the retelling until it barely exists. And when you try to add something — when you say "well, we decided to—" they talk right over you. Or they give you a look. Or later, when you bring it up privately, they tell you you're being oversensitive. That you always have to make everything about you. That they're proud of you, why isn't that enough?

And you walk away wondering if you imagined it. If you're being petty. If wanting credit for your own work makes you selfish.

You didn't imagine it. It wasn't petty. And it has a name.

In Chapter 1 we talked about what narcissism is — the word, the clinical picture, the types. Now we are going to get into the specific traits. Those traits can show up in everyday interactions. And in harmful relationships, repeated behavior can wear down your sense of self.

This is important: no single moment proves anything. One bad conversation does not make someone a narcissist. One instance of someone taking credit doesn't tell you everything about who they are. What we are looking for — what matters — is the pattern. The consistency. The way these things show up again and again, across different situations, with the same person always at the center and you always adjusting around them.

Keep that in mind as we go through these. You are not building a case. You are learning to recognize a pattern that may have been invisible to you until now.

Entitlement — when their needs automatically come first

Entitlement is one of the most visible traits once you know what you are looking for — but it can be almost invisible when you are inside it, because it tends to operate quietly, through assumption rather than demand.

An entitled person does not always announce that their needs come first. They just act as if they do. And after a while you stop noticing that you are always the one who adjusts, always the one who gives up the plan, always the one whose schedule bends to accommodate theirs. It just becomes how things work. You stopped asking for things that were important to you a long time ago — not because anyone told you not to, but because you learned that asking rarely worked out and not asking was easier.

Here is what entitlement looks like in the everyday moments:

Their time is treated as more valuable than yours. If they are late, it is because things came up. If you are late, it is disrespectful. Their schedule determines when you eat, when you sleep, when you make plans, when you cancel them. If you need to leave early, it becomes a conversation. If they need to leave early, you go.

Decisions about shared things — money, time, space, plans — are made as if your input is optional. Not because they tell you that. Because by the time the decision has been made, your opportunity to weigh in has already passed. And if you bring it up after the fact, the response is usually confusion. *What's the problem? This is what made sense. Why do you always have to make things complicated?*

They receive more than they give, and the imbalance keeps becoming part of how things work. You may not know whether they recognize it. What you can see is that it keeps happening. Their needs are treated as obvious and legitimate. Yours are treated like requests that require justification.

What makes entitlement so hard to name in real time is that it rarely announces itself. It doesn't come with a speech. It comes with a pattern of small assumptions that accumulate over months and years until one day you realize you cannot remember the last time your needs were the ones that mattered.

The need for admiration — and what happens when it isn't there

Everyone needs to feel appreciated sometimes. That is not narcissism. That is human.

What we are talking about here is different. For some people, the need for admiration can become excessive and difficult to satisfy, even when you offer reassurance. You tell them they did a great job and they want to hear it again. You celebrate their success and they are already pointing to the next thing they need recognized for. You compliment them and they redirect to something bigger they want you to notice.

And when the admiration isn't there — when you are tired, or distracted, or just having a normal day where you are not focused on them — something shifts. The mood changes. The warmth cools. There is a withdrawal, or an irritability, or a pointed comment that lands just hard enough to make you aware that something is wrong, even if you can't quite say what.

So you start paying attention to their need for recognition the way you would pay attention to weather. You learn to read the signs. You learn when to offer something affirming and when to stay quiet. You learn to make them feel seen because when they don't feel seen, everyone around them feels it.

This is not love. This is management. And the fact that you got so good at managing it without anyone teaching you is one of the most telling signs that something has been off for a long time.

The competition for the center — when your experience keeps getting replaced by theirs

You come home and tell them something that happened to you. Something hard, or something exciting, or something you just needed to say out loud to another person.

And within a few minutes, the conversation has moved to them.

You may not know whether they realize they are doing it. But whatever you bring — whatever you share — keeps becoming a bridge to their own experience. Your hard day becomes a reminder of their harder week. Your good news becomes a setup for their bigger achievement. Your grief becomes a detour that leads back to their own pain.

This is called lack of reciprocity, and it shows up in a hundred small ways that are easy to miss individually and exhausting to live with collectively. It is the feeling that you are always the one asking how they are and rarely being asked how you are. That your stories get cut short while theirs go long. That you have become a very good listener in this relationship — not by choice, but because the alternative was talking to someone who wasn't really there.

Over time, this does something to you. You stop bringing things. You stop sharing. You learn to process your own life privately because there is no real space for it here. And when someone eventually asks why you seem so closed off, you won't have a quick answer — because closing off happened so gradually you barely noticed it happening.

Arrogance and contempt — when their superiority becomes the air in the room

This one people recognize more easily — but only when it is obvious. It can also be subtler than most people expect.

Obvious arrogance announces itself. It's the person who has an opinion on everything and makes sure you know theirs is the right one. Who talks over people. Who dismisses ideas before they are finished being said. Who is never wrong — or if they are, who finds a way to make being wrong somehow still about how smart they are.

But contempt — treating you as though you are beneath them — can be quiet. It lives in a tone. A look. A particular way of correcting you that makes correction feel like pity. The sigh when you say something they consider beneath their level. The eye roll they don't quite hide.

The way they explain things to you as if you are slightly slow, even on topics you know well.

Living with low-level contempt is one of the most corrosive experiences there is — because it is constant and because it rarely rises to the level where you feel like you can name it without sounding dramatic. Nobody hit you. Nobody screamed at you. They just looked at you like that again. They just said it in that tone again. And slowly, over time, you start to believe what that look is telling you. That you are not quite enough. Not quite smart enough. Not quite right enough.

You started to shrink to fit the space they left for you. That is what contempt does when you live inside it long enough.

Exploitativeness — when your effort becomes their resource

This one is important and often misunderstood because it doesn't always look like someone taking advantage of you. Sometimes it looks like them needing you. And needing you can feel good — until you realize the needing only goes one direction.

An exploitative pattern means that your skills, your time, your energy, your connections, your emotional labor, your money — these things flow toward them consistently and without the same flowing back. Not because there was a conversation about it. Because it just became how things were. You are good at this thing they need. You have resources they can use. And you care about them, so you give. And they receive. And that becomes the shape of the relationship.

The moment you can't give — when you are sick, or overwhelmed, or when you say for once that you just can't right now — is often the moment things get complicated. It can start to feel as though the relationship depended mostly on what you were providing. When the provision stops, the warmth often stops with it. Not completely. Not always. But enough for you to notice. Enough to make you wonder what, exactly, they were there for.

Difficulty attending to other people's needs — when your reality doesn't quite register

This can be one of the hardest patterns to put into words — especially when it happens so often that it becomes the water you swim in rather than something you can point to and name.

It is not that they never do anything for you. They might. It is that when they do, it tends to be on their terms, in their timing, in the way that works for them. What you actually needed — the specific thing, the specific way, the moment that mattered — that rarely lands quite right.

So you learn to need less. Or to need differently. You shape your needs around what they can give rather than asking for what you actually need. You adjust. You accommodate. You tell yourself you're not high-maintenance, you don't need that much, you're fine.

You are not fine. You have just been getting by on less than you deserve for so long that less started to feel like normal.

And why it works this way — why the right response so rarely comes at the right time in the right way — that is exactly what the next chapter is about.

What one moment can and cannot tell you

Before we go any further I want to come back to something I said at the beginning of this chapter.

No single moment tells the whole story. Everyone has bad days. Everyone can be selfish or distracted or absent sometimes. Everyone can fail to give someone the credit they deserve or take up more than their share of a conversation or need more reassurance than they're giving.

The difference is what happens after. Does the person recognize it? Do they care when it's brought to their attention? Can they hear your experience without immediately making it about them? Can they sit in a moment of being wrong without it turning into a crisis?

One instance of these traits is not a pattern. A pattern is what you see across time and situations. You may not know how someone behaves in every other relationship. The pattern is what happens when things don't go their way, when they are confronted, when you need something they don't feel like giving.

That is what we are building toward in this book — your ability to see the pattern clearly. Not to judge. Not to diagnose. But to understand what you have been living inside, so you can stop absorbing it as if it were your fault.

It was never your fault.

In the next chapter we are going to look at empathy — specifically what it looks like in daily life when someone does not consistently respond to your pain in a way that changes their behavior. Because that is at the center of everything.

Chapter 3 — The Empathy Gap: What It Looks Like When It's Missing

Let me put you inside a moment.

You just got some hard news. Maybe it was a health scare. Maybe something fell apart at work. Maybe someone you loved died. Maybe it was something smaller than that — something that wouldn't make the evening news but that hit you hard anyway, in the specific way that things hit you hard when you're already running on empty.

And you told them.

You sat with them, or called them, or said it in the car on the way somewhere — and you told them what happened, what you were feeling, how it landed.

And they responded.

Not cruelly. Not with contempt. They said something. Maybe they said the right words. *That's rough. I'm sorry. That sucks.* Maybe they asked a follow-up question. Maybe they even hugged you.

And yet — when it was over, when you walked away from that conversation — you felt more alone than before you said anything.

You have probably spent a lot of time confused about that feeling. Because they did respond. They didn't ignore you. They weren't obviously dismissive. So why did it feel like talking to a wall? Why did you leave that conversation feeling emptier than when you walked in?

That is the empathy gap. And it is one of the hardest things to name because it is not about what they did. It is about what didn't happen.

What empathy actually is — before we talk about what it isn't

Empathy gets talked about like it's about being kind. Being warm. Being a good person.

That’s not quite it.

The simplest way I can put it: empathy can involve understanding what another person is feeling and emotionally resonating with it. Those are related but distinct processes. If your friend calls to say their parent died, can you pause to consider what they might be feeling, rather than assuming their experience would match yours? Can you listen and make space for what they tell you?

Empathy can shape how you respond, but understanding or sharing someone’s feelings does not guarantee a particular action. Someone may care and still respond imperfectly. What matters in a relationship is also what they actually do when you need support.

That second kind — the feeling kind, the kind that actually lands — is what researchers call affective empathy. We’ll come back to that distinction in a moment. But for now, here’s what matters: you walked away from that conversation feeling more alone than before you spoke. They heard your words. They may even have understood the basic facts. But you did not feel understood or supported. The words, even the hug, did not give you what you needed in that moment. You can name that gap without claiming to know exactly what they felt inside.

When that gap keeps repeating, it can be hard to ignore. You may find yourself doing most of the emotional work in conversations where you share something that matters. It is in every moment where you needed someone to show up and they were physically present but completely somewhere else. It is in the particular loneliness of being with another person and feeling entirely alone.

What they actually feel — and what they don’t

Let me be straight with you about this. Empathy really is complicated, and people can have strengths and difficulties in different parts of it. That does not erase the harm you experienced.

Here is what I know to be true from living it — and from hearing it from thousands of people who have lived it too.

They are not emotionless. They feel things. They get angry — fast. They get jealous. They feel disrespected and victimized and

overlooked. They feel euphoric when they are winning. Those emotions? Very much present. Very much real.

Here is the distinction that explains everything.

Researchers often distinguish cognitive empathy — understanding another person's emotional perspective — from affective empathy, which involves emotionally resonating with what they feel. Recognizing someone's emotion is not the same as knowing what to say or choosing to act. Research finds varied links between narcissistic traits and both forms of empathy. Someone can understand what you are feeling and still respond in ways that leave you unsupported.

That is the gap you experienced. The words were there, but you were still left feeling alone with your pain.

Here is what I know, and what person after person has told me: they showed their pain clearly. And then the same things kept happening. That is what is true. That is what you watched happen, over and over. That is what you can point to.

Whatever they understood or felt inside — what I can tell you is what I experienced and what I've heard from thousands of people: it felt like nothing got in. You could show them your pain clearly, more than once, more than a hundred times. And their behavior did not change.

What I can tell you is this: in my experience, they do not respond to your pain the way you respond to theirs.

When someone you love is hurting, you may feel some of that pain, understand what they need, or want to help. Those responses often work together, but they are not identical. Caring can motivate repair, and whether repair actually happens is something you can observe.

For many people, concern for others is one influence on how they respond, alongside habits, choices, and circumstances.

What I saw — and what person after person has described to me — was a different kind of response. The response you received treated your pain like a problem to manage, rather than a need for support. Something is happening. Words are being said. And the response — if there is one — can feel like performance. Words that sound right. A

hug that is the right shape. But often something hollow behind it, like none of it was actually about you.

That is why no matter how clearly you showed them your pain — no matter how many times, no matter how many ways — nothing changed. Not because you failed to explain it right. What you could see was that, despite repeated conversations, their behavior did not change.

That is not an excuse for what they did. The damage is real. But the repeated lack of change is part of the pattern you can identify. And once you understand it, you stop wondering what was wrong with you.

Nothing was wrong with you. You were trying to reach someone who, for whatever reason, did not meet you there.

What it looks like — every single day

They don't ask how you feel. They don't check on you. They don't remember what you told them last week that was weighing on you, and they don't follow up. What you feel, over time, is that you are not in their thoughts when you're not in the room.

Here is what that looks like in real life.

You are crying and they get angry. Not at whatever made you cry — at you, for crying. Your tears land as an inconvenience. An accusation. Something that is being done to them. So instead of being comforted, you end up managing their reaction to your pain — explaining yourself, calming them down, apologizing for falling apart — while whatever you were actually upset about gets buried under the new problem you created by showing emotion.

You tell them something hurt you and within two minutes the conversation is about them. Why it wasn't their fault. Why your feelings are out of proportion. Why this says something about you and not about what they did. The moment you said *you hurt me*, the conversation stopped being about your pain and became about their image. And you are the one who has to fix it.

You are sick. Actually sick — in bed, can't function. And the concern lasts for a day, maybe less. And then something shifts. The attention disappears. And somehow you find yourself apologizing for being an

inconvenience, for not getting better faster, for needing things when it isn't convenient. You are sick and you are apologizing to them.

You share good news — something you worked for, something that matters to you — and within minutes the conversation has moved to them. Their story. Their achievement. Their equivalent thing that is bigger. You were still standing there with something to celebrate and they were already somewhere else.

You have a hard conversation — a real one, something that needed to be said — and they listen. They respond. They seem to get it. And three days later you bring it up and they look at you like you're speaking a foreign language. Whatever happened in that first conversation, it did not lead to lasting change. The words came in. Nothing shifted.

None of these moments announce themselves as cruelty. They are small. Ordinary. Easy to explain away. And that is exactly the problem — because you spend years explaining them away, absorbing them, adjusting around them. You don't realize what is happening until the damage is already done.

Why explaining it never fixed it

You tried to tell them. Not just once.

Many times. In many ways. Carefully, quietly, with examples. With patience you had to dig for because you were already running on empty. With as much grace as you could manage.

And it didn't work.

They apologized sometimes. They promised to do better. And for a few days, maybe a few weeks, something shifted. They checked in more. They seemed to remember you existed as a person with your own experience.

And then it drifted back. Slowly. Without drama. Just a quiet return to the way things always were — where your reality was background noise and their needs were the only thing in the foreground.

Here is why.

What you were asking for was consistent care when you were hurting. You could explain that need clearly, but communication alone could not make the other person choose a different response. Some aspects of empathy and supportive behavior can change; you were not responsible for making that change happen.

That is not you failing. That is not you asking for too much. That is you bumping up against a pattern that did not start with you and did not change no matter what you tried. And understanding that — really understanding it — is what finally stops the loop where you try and they temporarily try and it fades and you blame yourself for not explaining it right.

You explained it right. They just did not give you what it would have taken to fix it.

What it does to you

No one starts minimizing their own emotional needs on purpose. It happens gradually. Through repetition.

The first time you share something hard and it doesn't land, you adjust. You try saying it differently. You wonder if the timing was off. You try again.

The tenth time, you start wondering if the problem is you. If you need too much. If your feelings take up too much space.

The fiftieth time, you have already stopped sharing most things. Not because you decided to. Because you learned — the way you learn things you live with long enough — that sharing certain things in this relationship does not give you what sharing is supposed to give you. It doesn't bring you closer to being understood. It mostly just leaves you more alone and more confused about why.

So you build a whole life that runs parallel to the relationship. You process your own pain privately. You celebrate your own wins quietly. You find other places to put what you're carrying — friends, journals, the drive home where you have a few minutes to feel something before you walk back in and put the mask back on.

And somewhere in all of that, without anyone telling you this was happening, you start to believe that your emotional needs are the

problem. That you are the difficult one. That a less needy version of you would be easier to love.

That belief is not yours. It is a conclusion you drew from living inside conditions that were never built to hold you. And it is one of the most important things this book is going to help you put down — because it is not true, it was never true, and you have been carrying it long enough.

How you know it's this and not just a rough patch

Not every person who misses the moment is a narcissist. People get distracted. People have hard seasons of their own. People sometimes fail to show up and need to be told they failed.

The difference is what happens when you tell them.

Someone can care about you and still get the response wrong. They can miss the moment, say the wrong thing, or struggle to understand. What matters when you tell them you were hurt is what happens next. Do they listen? Take responsibility? Make an effort to respond differently over time? You cannot prove what they felt inside from one conversation. But you can watch how they treat you afterward.

What we are talking about in this chapter is different. In this repeated pattern, your pain keeps being treated as a problem to manage rather than an experience that deserves attention. Someone for whom every conversation about your hurt eventually becomes a conversation about their feelings about being accused. Someone who can say the right words and then, days later, act as though nothing was said — because the words, whatever they meant in the moment, changed nothing.

That consistent pull — back to themselves, every single time, no matter what you brought to the table — is the gap.

And now you have a name for it.

What comes next

Here is the hard part.

The empathy gap doesn't exist alongside everything else being wrong. That would almost be easier to see. It exists alongside moments that

felt real — moments of warmth, of laughter, of something that felt like connection.

You are probably still holding onto those moments. I understand that. I did it too.

But warmth is not the same as love. Laughter is not the same as caring about you. And a person who can be warm sometimes but consistently does not respond to your pain — does not let what you're carrying change how they treat you — cannot hold the weight of a real relationship. Cannot hold the weight of you.

That is what this book is going to help you see clearly. Not to hurt you. To free you.

In the next chapter we are going to look at accountability — specifically what happens, in real time, when you try to have a conversation that asks them to own something they did. Because if you have lived this, you know that conversation almost never goes the way it should. And now you are going to understand exactly why.

Chapter 4 — No Accountability: Why Sorry Never Fixes Anything

They apologized.

Maybe more than once. Maybe many times. Maybe with tears. Maybe with the right words — the exact words you needed to hear, the words that made you think *okay, they finally get it.*

And then — nothing changed.

Not all at once. Not obviously. It drifted back. The same behavior that started the conversation came back quietly, without announcement. And you found yourself, weeks later, back in the same place. Trying to have the same conversation. Wondering what it would take for something to actually be different.

If you have lived this, you know that feeling. And you have probably spent a long time trying to figure out what you did wrong. What you should have said differently. What would have finally made the apology mean something.

Nothing. That is the answer. Because what was missing was never the right words. What was missing was accountability. And accountability is not the same thing as an apology.

That is what this chapter is about.

What accountability actually is

Most people use the words *sorry* and *accountable* as if they mean the same thing. They don’t.

Saying sorry is a statement. It is words. It can be genuine. It can also be strategic — a way to end a conversation, reduce tension, get things back to normal. The words themselves don’t tell you which one it is.

Accountability is something you can observe. It is what happens after.

Accountability means taking responsibility for what you did, listening to how it caused harm, and making a meaningful effort to do something different. Not for a week. Not just until the tension passed.

Over time. You cannot prove what someone felt or wanted inside, but you can see whether they take responsibility and follow through.

An apology means more when it acknowledges responsibility, addresses the harm, and is followed by efforts to repair it. Without that follow-through, the same painful loop can open right back up.

What it looks like when it's missing

You have probably experienced the apology that is not really an apology. You know it when you get one. But it can be hard to put into words exactly what is off about it. So let me walk you through what it looks like in real life.

I'm sorry you feel that way.

This is one you may recognize. And it sounds like an apology, which is why it can be so disorienting. But look at what it actually says. It acknowledges your feelings without naming anything they did. By itself, it does not take responsibility for the action that hurt you.

I'm sorry, but —

Pay attention to what follows "but." Sometimes an explanation becomes a way to avoid responsibility for what happened. *I'm sorry, but you have to understand why I did it. I'm sorry, but you weren't exactly easy to deal with either. I'm sorry, but I already said that and I don't know what else you want from me.* When the explanation redirects blame or dismisses the harm, the apology may leave the original concern unresolved.

I already said I was sorry. What more do you want?

This one is used when the apology has already been offered — once, maybe days ago — and the expectation is that it was sufficient. The idea here is that sorry is a transaction. You say it, the debt is cleared, and anything you bring up after that point is you being unreasonable. This version treats accountability as a one-time event rather than something that shows up in behavior.

Why do you always have to bring things up?

This is when the accountability conversation itself becomes the problem. You needed to talk about something. That need becomes the

issue. Now you are defending your right to have the conversation instead of having the conversation. What they did has been entirely replaced by what you are doing by trying to address it.

You're too sensitive. I was just joking. You always take things the wrong way.

This one removes the harm entirely. If you are the problem — if your perception is the problem — then there is nothing to be accountable for. When this response keeps coming after you have explained the harm, the conversation can shift away from their behavior and onto whether you can trust your own perception. That shift leaves the original concern unaddressed.

These are patterns. And once you see them clearly, you will start recognizing them in real time — in the moment they are happening, before you have already spent two hours trying to explain why the apology didn't land.

Why the temporary change is not proof that it worked

Here is something that keeps a lot of people stuck: sometimes after a confrontation, things do get better. For a while.

They check in more. They are gentler. They seem to actually be listening. And you think — *maybe this time it took. Maybe the conversation finally got through.*

And then it fades.

This can be one of the most confusing parts of living in this dynamic, because the temporary improvement gives you reason to hope. It may be a beginning, but a brief improvement alone cannot tell you whether meaningful accountability will last.

When a confrontation brings discomfort, someone may respond differently for a while. That change can reflect several possibilities, including genuine effort or pressure in the moment. You cannot tell which from the improvement alone.

What matters most for your decisions is what happens after the immediate tension passes. Does the change continue, and is the harm addressed?

Sometimes the behavior returns. The improvement may have been real in the moment, but when the same harm repeats, you have reason to question whether the change will last.

The conversation that never goes where it should

You have had this conversation. Probably many versions of it.

You tried to have it calmly. You tried having it with emotion. You wrote it down first. You waited until the right moment. You brought specific examples. You explained how it made you feel. You tried everything you could think of to give it the best chance of landing.

Here is what usually happens instead.

You say something about what hurt you. Within minutes they are explaining why it wasn't their fault. Why the context changes things. Why you are misremembering. Why what you're describing didn't happen the way you're saying it happened. Why you need to look at your part in this.

By the end of the conversation, you are defending whether the thing even happened. You are questioning your own memory. You are somehow explaining yourself — your tone, your timing, your history — when you walked in trying to get an acknowledgment of one specific thing they did.

This is a pattern you can recognize when a conversation about harm repeatedly turns into defending your memory, tone, or character. You may not know why they redirect it. What you can see is that the original concern never gets addressed.

What you experience as a conversation going sideways is a conversation that has been redirected. And the more often it happens, the more you start to wonder if the problem is how you're raising things — when the problem is what happens every time something gets raised.

What genuine accountability actually looks like

I want to give you something to hold onto here — because I do not want this chapter to leave you only able to identify what is broken. I want you to know what the real thing looks like, so you have something to compare it to.

Genuine accountability does not announce itself dramatically. It is usually quiet.

It looks like someone who, when you tell them they hurt you, stops. Actually stops. Does not immediately explain or defend or redirect. Just takes in what you said and lets it land.

It looks like someone who can say what they did — in their own words, without you having to coach them through it — and name why it was harmful. You can hear whether they name the harm, then watch whether their actions line up with what they said.

It looks like an apology that names what they did — not just the fact that you are upset. The words matter, but what follows helps you judge whether repair is happening.

And it looks like behavior that is different afterward. Not for a week. Over time. Because accountability is more than a conversation. You see it in what someone does over time, including when there is no confrontation on the table. The follow-through matters, whether or not you can know exactly what motivated it.

You deserve that. That is not too much to ask for. That is what every healthy relationship requires.

What it does to you when you never get it

No one warns you about what it does to your relationship with reality when you spend years in a cycle of confrontation, apology, and no change.

It starts to make you question yourself. So you find another explanation. You were too intense. You brought it up at the wrong time. You didn’t explain it right. You expected too much.

You build an entire internal case for why the problem is you. Because the alternative — that the accountability was never coming, no matter how clearly you asked for it — is a harder thing to hold.

And once you can see the pattern — once you can recognize a non-apology in real time and understand why the conversation keeps ending up back on you — something shifts. Not overnight. But it shifts.

You stop trying to find the right words to make them accountable. You understand that is not a problem your words can solve. And you start paying attention to something more reliable than what they say: what they do.

What they do over time tells you more about the pattern than promises alone.

How you know the difference

A person who is genuinely trying to do better can still react defensively. What matters is whether they return to your concern, take responsibility, and make an effort to change.

They may feel uncomfortable or disagree about details without dismissing your right to raise a concern. Watch whether the conversation repeatedly becomes about your character instead of addressing the harm.

They are uncomfortable — sometimes genuinely uncomfortable. Being told you caused harm is not a pleasant thing to sit with, even when you are trying to do right by someone. The discomfort is real.

But accountability can look like staying in a difficult conversation without turning the focus back on you. Someone may feel defensive or uncomfortable and still take responsibility. What matters is whether they address the harm and make an effort to change.

That is the difference. Not perfection. Not never hurting anyone. The difference is what someone does when they are told they caused harm, and whether that changes anything.

Over time, consistent accountability can help rebuild trust. You can bring up something that hurt and see whether they listen. You can look for change over time. That is one way trust may begin to grow again.

What we are talking about in this book is the opposite of that. This is someone you learned, over time, not to bring things to. Not because you stopped having things to bring. Because bringing them was costing you more than it was giving you. Because the conversation always ended the same way — with you smaller and them untouched.

That is not a relationship. That is a performance of one.

And you have already spent too long being its audience.

In the next chapter we are going to look at the two faces — the person they are in public versus the person they are at home. Because if you have lived this, you know the gap between those two versions. And you know how that gap makes you sound when you try to describe what you've been living through. We are going to name what that gap is and why it exists.

Chapter 5 — The Two Faces: Who They Are in Public vs. Who They Are at Home

You know the version other people see.

Everyone does. That is the point.

The version other people see is charming. Engaging. The kind of person who remembers your name, asks follow-up questions, makes you feel like the most important person in the room. They are funny at the right moments and serious when that's what's needed. They show up. They say the right things. They are, by every visible measure, a good person — maybe even a great one.

And then you get in the car.

Or you get home. Or the door closes. Or the other people leave.

And something shifts.

Not always dramatically. Sometimes it is just a coldness that comes in. A silence that has weight to it. A look that says you have already done something wrong and you have not figured out what it is yet. The person who was just laughing with everyone — warm, easy, present — is now somewhere else entirely. And you are left trying to figure out what happened between the parking lot and the front door.

If you have lived this, you know that feeling in your body before you can name it in words. The way you brace when the door closes. The way you read the air the moment you are alone with them. The particular alertness of someone who has learned that the version on display for everyone else is not the version they will be alone with.

That is what this chapter is about. The gap between how someone treats you when other people are watching and how they treat you in private. When other people have only seen one side, that gap can make you harder to believe.

Why no one believes you

You tried to tell someone.

Maybe a friend. Maybe a family member. Maybe a therapist who had met them once at a party. And you watched their face while you talked. And you saw it — the slight shift, the careful neutrality, the unspoken thing behind their eyes that said *are you sure?* Because they knew this person. And the person they knew did not match what you were describing.

This is one of the most painful parts of living inside this dynamic. Not just what you are going through — but that other people may know a version of this person that does not match what happens in private. That difference can make your account harder for them to understand.

You are not unreliable. But you are describing someone that other people have never seen.

The person other people know holds doors open. Volunteers. Tells good stories. Shows up at funerals and remembers to ask how your mother is doing. They are present in the ways that are visible. They are generous in the ways that get noticed. And because that is the version of them that exists in the world — the version that shows up in public, that gets talked about, that people defend — your account of what happens privately can sound, to someone on the outside, like a misunderstanding at best and cruelty at worst.

You know what you lived. You are not confused about it. But explaining it to someone who only knows the public version means you are not just describing your experience — you are asking someone to believe that the person they think they know is a different person than the one you live with. And that is a very hard thing to ask people to do.

So many survivors stop asking. Not because they give up. Because the cost of not being believed, on top of everything else they are carrying, is too high. It is easier to stay quiet than to explain yourself to someone who will walk away still unsure what to think.

That silence is one of the ways this dynamic sustains itself. When you cannot tell people what is happening, it stays hidden. And when it stays hidden, you stay more alone inside it.

It's not just public versus private

I want to be clear about something, because "two faces" can make it sound like there is a simple split — the charming public version and the difficult private version — and once you know that, you know what to expect at home.

That is not how it works.

The inconsistency is not just between who they are in public and who they are behind closed doors. It is between who they are at breakfast and who they are by dinner. Who they are when they wake up and who they are three hours later. Who they were yesterday and who they are today, with no explanation for what changed.

You could have a genuinely good morning — easy, warm, like the version of them you fell in love with — and by afternoon something has shifted with no warning, no trigger you can identify. And the next morning they might be fine again. Back to warm. Like the afternoon never happened.

This is what people on the outside miss entirely when they hear "they can be so nice sometimes." Yes. They can. That is not the problem. The problem is that you never know which version you are going to get, and you have no way to find out until you are already in it.

That unpredictability can be one of the most damaging parts of this dynamic. The good version still shows up. Regularly enough that you remember it, hold onto it, wait for it. It was real, and recent. And that hope can be one part of what makes leaving or explaining the relationship so difficult. Fear, safety, finances, children, and support can matter too.

You are not chasing something imaginary. You are chasing something that actually exists. It just does not stay.

The unpredictable switch — what it looks like when ordinary life suddenly becomes a confrontation, and what it can do to you over time — is exactly what the next chapter is for.

How they manage it

You have probably wondered, at some point, how they do it. How they can be one person in public and another person at home. How they can flip so completely — and so quickly — between warmth and coldness, between charm and contempt.

The public version does not have to be entirely a performance. Someone may be warm and considerate in one setting and behave very differently toward you in another. You can recognize that contrast without knowing whether they are deliberately turning their effort on or off.

In some relationships, home is where behavior changes. The patience and consideration others see may not carry into private life. You may notice control, anger, or dismissal when no one else is present. The difference matters, even when you cannot know exactly why it happens.

You could not count on being treated the way other people were treated. And you were not warned that the private version would look this different.

What makes this particularly hard to hold is that the same person who is cold to you in private can walk back out into the world and be, by all appearances, wonderful. They can go from a conversation that left you shaken to a dinner party where they are the most engaging person in the room. And they can do it without seeming to carry anything from one into the other.

You carry it. They don’t seem to.

That asymmetry — the way they can move between worlds without leaving a trace, while you are still processing what just happened — is something survivors describe over and over. It is one of the most destabilizing things to live with. Because it makes the harm feel like it only exists inside you.

It doesn’t mean the harm only existed inside you. It happened. What you can see is that you were left carrying its effects while the other person behaved as though nothing had happened.

What other people see vs. what you live

Let me be specific about the gap — because it is not just about personality. It is about behavior.

In public, they are considerate. They let people finish their sentences. They listen. They are patient with inconvenience. They are easy to be around.

At home, you are not allowed to finish your sentences. What you say gets interrupted, corrected, dismissed. Patience disappeared somewhere between the front door and the kitchen. The inconvenience of your needs — the small ordinary inconveniences of living with another person — produces a reaction that feels completely out of proportion to what triggered it.

In public, they speak about you warmly. They brag about you, even. They make sure the people around them know they are with someone good.

At home, you are too sensitive. Too emotional. Too much. Never quite right. Never quite enough.

In public, they are generous. They pick up the tab. They give compliments freely. They make people feel seen.

At home, everything has a cost. The generosity that flows so easily outward does not flow inward in the same way. What you receive is conditional in ways that are hard to articulate but impossible to miss.

The person other people know is not a lie. That person exists. But they are not the full picture. And the part of the picture that only you can see — the part that happens behind closed doors — is the part that has been costing you the most.

The isolation that comes from the gap

Here is what that gap does to you over time.

It makes you a bad witness to your own life.

Not because you are confused or unreliable or making things up. But because the evidence other people have access to does not match the

evidence you have. You have been inside this relationship. You have seen both versions. You know the gap firsthand.

But when you try to describe it to someone who only knows the public version, you are asking them to take your word for something they have never seen. And even the people who love you — even the ones who want to believe you — can struggle with that. Because the person you are describing does not match the person they know. And people generally trust what they can see.

So you start second-guessing yourself. Not because the harm was not real. But because every time you try to put it into words, you can hear how it sounds to someone who has only ever seen the charming version. You can anticipate the doubt. You can feel yourself about to be disbelieved before you even finish the sentence.

And so you stay quiet. You process alone. You learn to hold what you know without being able to share it, because sharing it costs you more than it gives you.

That is an enormous amount to carry. And it is one of the most important things this book is going to help you put down — the idea that because other people did not see it, it was not real. It was real. The fact that it happened behind closed doors does not make it less true. It just makes it harder to prove. And you should never have been in the position of having to prove it.

What it means for you going forward

Understanding the two faces does something important for you.

It can help you stop using other people's perception of them as evidence against your own experience.

If the people who love them think they are wonderful — that is true. And it does not contradict what you lived. Both things can be true. The person who is charming at dinner can be the same person who made your life smaller behind closed doors. Those two truths do not cancel each other out.

It can also help you understand why leaving — or even just naming what was happening — was so complicated. Other people may have known only the version of this person that seemed kind and

trustworthy. That can make it harder to be believed or supported when you describe what happened in private. And that can be one part of what makes leaving more complicated.

The gap between how someone behaves in public and private can help keep harmful behavior out of view. A positive reputation may make other people less likely to recognize what happens behind closed doors. Sometimes that image is actively managed; sometimes you cannot know how intentional it is. Either way, the private behavior deserves to be taken seriously.

You were not imagining it. You were not making it bigger than it was. You were living with behavior that other people did not see, and that could make it especially hard to explain.

And you saw it anyway. That matters.

In the next chapter we are going to look at the switch itself — the sudden chaos, the flip that seems to come from nowhere, and what repeated unpredictability can do to you. You may not always know what triggered a shift, but you can examine what happened without automatically blaming yourself.

Chapter 6 — The Switch: Manufactured Chaos and the Flip That Comes From Nowhere

You were watching TV. Everything was fine. You got up to make dinner — just dinner, the thing that happens every night — and something shifted. You could feel it before anything was said. And within twenty minutes, the whole evening had changed.

You did not do anything.

That is the part that takes the longest to believe. Not because you are dense or slow or in denial, but because it goes against every instinct you have. When something blows up, there is supposed to be a reason. There is supposed to be a moment you can point to and say *that is what started it.* You have been trained — by logic, by experience, by the basic way most human relationships work — to believe that conflict has a cause. That if you can find the cause, you can fix it. And if you can fix it, it won't happen again.

That is not how this works.

You may not be able to identify what set off a particular shift. But even if an ordinary thing you said or did came before it, that does not make you responsible for the other person's harmful reaction. What matters here is recognizing the response and the responsibility for it, not trying to find the perfect way to prevent it.

This chapter is about understanding what that switch looks like. Not so you can control another person's harmful reactions. That responsibility is not yours. But so you can stop blaming yourself for not stopping it, and start to understand what living with it has cost you.

The sudden emotional shift

Here is what it looks like from the inside.

One moment things are fine. Not just tolerable — actually fine. They are relaxed, or engaged, or even warm. You are going about your day. And then something happens, or nothing identifiable happens, and the

temperature changes. You feel it before a single word is said. You feel it in the way they move across a room, in a small silence that lands differently than other silences, in some quality of their attention that you have learned — over months or years — to read as a sign.

And the moment you feel it, something activates in you.

You are suddenly running calculations you do not even consciously choose to run. What was the last thing said? What am I doing right now — is this the problem? What is coming next? Should I say something or will that make it worse? Should I act normal, pretend I don't notice, or will that make it worse too? You are doing all of this — all of it — in the time it takes them to cross the room. And you have gotten very good at it, because you have had a lot of practice.

That is not you being high-strung or sensitive or hard to live with. When you have lived with unpredictable reactions, becoming alert to small changes can make sense. Anxiety or heightened vigilance may develop or intensify in those circumstances, though people respond differently and earlier experiences can matter too. Watching for warning signs can become one way of trying to protect yourself.

The sudden shift is not the same every time. Sometimes it is an explosion — loud, present, impossible to miss. Sometimes it is cold and quiet, which in many ways is harder, because quiet cruelty does not announce itself and the absence of a target makes it harder to respond to. Sometimes it is a low-level edge, a tension that fills a room without being named, that no one outside the house would believe existed. Sometimes it is the sudden withdrawal of warmth — the person you were talking to two minutes ago is simply gone, and in their place is someone who meets everything you say with flat or clipped responses, and you spend the rest of the evening trying to find the person who was just there.

Each version is real. Each version does damage. And the most important thing to understand about all of them is this: you may have had no reliable way to predict which ordinary moment would turn into a confrontation. You were not responsible for the harmful reaction.

When an ordinary situation becomes a confrontation

Dinner is a good example. Not because it is dramatic — it is the opposite of dramatic — but because that is exactly the point.

You cook dinner. That is a normal, unremarkable act. You have cooked dinner hundreds of times. And yet this time, something is wrong. The timing is off. The thing you made was wrong. You were cooking while they were trying to relax. You didn't start soon enough. You were too loud. The specific problem changes — it is never reliably the same thing twice — but the result is familiar: what should have been dinner became a confrontation, and you are now somewhere between defending yourself and trying to de-escalate something that has gone from zero to serious in a very short amount of time.

And an hour later, they are fine.

You are not. But they seem fine again. The storm that blew up, the thing that just happened, the words that were said — they are ready to come back and sit next to you, or go to bed, or talk about something else, or be normal. And they may act as though your experience of what happened has already ended too, even when you are still affected.

In this pattern, a confrontation can arise without a trigger you can identify, and the other person may seem ready to return to normal before you are. Stress or fatigue may be part of the circumstances, but neither explains away harmful behavior or proves what caused a particular episode. You cannot reliably prevent another person's choices by finding the perfect explanation. When the reaction keeps falling on you, that repeated behavior is what deserves attention.

The household-task minefield

This is the part that people on the outside genuinely cannot picture.

You learn, over time, to wait. You wait until they are out of the house, or in another room, or genuinely occupied with something, to do ordinary things. Laundry. Dishes. Cleaning. Running the vacuum. Making a phone call. Things that have nothing to do with conflict and should not require any amount of strategic planning.

But you have learned that any of those things, on a wrong day, in the wrong moment, while they are in the wrong state, can become the

reason everything falls apart. So you plan around it. You do not clean when they are home and tense. You do not start the washing machine when they are trying to sleep, or relaxing, or when you have a sense that the day is already fragile. You hold ordinary tasks in a kind of suspension until the conditions feel safe enough to actually do them.

This is not an overreaction. This is learned information. You may have started planning ordinary tasks around the reactions you had experienced. Whatever your temperament was before, repeated conflict over everyday activities can make you watch more carefully for what might happen next.

What it costs you is a kind of constant low-level mental labor that never fully stops. You are always tracking — their mood, the time, the conditions, the likelihood that this moment is a good one or not. You are running a parallel calculation alongside everything else you are doing, every day. And it is exhausting in a way that is very hard to explain to someone who has never lived it, because from the outside, it doesn't look like work. It just looks like you, moving through your day.

Measuring words and predicting reactions

Before you speak, you calculate.

You have learned, over time, which topics are safe and which are likely to land wrong. You know which things you need to frame carefully. You know what to leave out, what to soften, what to hold back entirely. You know the right moment and the wrong moment to bring something up, and you have learned to read which one this is before you say a word.

This calculation happens so quickly now that it barely feels like thinking. It has just become part of how you talk. Part of how you are in this relationship. Over time, that calculation may have become more automatic as you tried to avoid another confrontation.

There is nothing wrong with learning to communicate carefully. The problem is what that calculation is in service of. In a healthy relationship, you think about how to say something because you care about being understood, or because the topic is genuinely sensitive, or

because you want the conversation to go well. Here, you are calculating not how to be understood but how not to trigger a reaction. You are not thinking about what you need. You are thinking about what is safe.

That is a different kind of thinking. And it changes you over time in ways that show up long after the relationship ends — in how you say things, in the hedging that becomes second nature, in how much effort you put into reading people before you trust them with the truth.

The instant reset after the blowup

The storm passed for them.

This is worth saying clearly, because it is one of the most disorienting parts of this dynamic and also one of the parts survivors describe wondering about. The blowup happened — the edge, the explosion, the cold wall, whatever form it took — and then, some time later, they came back warm, or neutral, or simply ready to be normal again, as if what happened earlier had been settled. But you had not experienced any resolution.

For you, it is not finished.

You are still holding it. You are still in the middle of something while they are already acting as though things are back to normal. Now their return to normal has created a new problem: they want you to be there too. They want to watch something together, or go to bed, or talk, or be easy with each other. And you cannot get there yet. You are not ready. You are still processing what just happened — still feeling the residue of a confrontation over dinner, or a cold silence that lasted three hours, or something that was said that is going to take more than twenty minutes to absorb.

And now, in some cases, that inability to reset becomes the next problem. You are holding onto it. You are being dramatic. You are punishing them. You cannot just let things go.

This is worth being very direct about: you are not being dramatic. You are being human. What happened earlier was real, and your response to something that felt significant should not be weaponized against you. The fact that they appear to reset quickly does not mean the event was

insignificant. It tells you how they are behaving now, not what they felt or processed inside.

You become the problem not because you are one, but because you are the only one still visibly affected by what occurred. And in a dynamic like this, visible effects are often treated as the real issue, while the thing that caused them goes without acknowledgment.

Why the other person's return to normal doesn't erase what happened

The warmth that follows a storm is not an apology, even when it feels like one.

When they come back easy — when the switch flips back and they are relaxed and normal again — it does not undo what happened. It does not mean the blowup did not occur, or that the things said were not said. It means they are acting as though the incident is over. Over time, you may feel pressure to treat that as a resolution, even when what happened has not been addressed.

The fight ends without being addressed because they act as though it is over. Eventually you may stop raising it too — not because you are finished, but because you have not been offered a way to resolve it. The acknowledgment never comes. The conversation about what happened either never happens, or starts and then gets turned around so that your response to what happened becomes the topic instead.

Repeated often enough, that absence does something specific. It makes you uncertain about your own experience. If the other person is back to normal and nothing gets acknowledged, it starts to feel like maybe you are making it bigger than it is. Like maybe the fact that you cannot reset as quickly means something is wrong with you.

The return to warm is not evidence that the harm did not occur. What matters is whether the harm was acknowledged and addressed. Those are different questions. And knowing the difference is part of what it takes to trust yourself again.

The cumulative effect of living with unpredictability

Here is what all of this does over time.

Living with repeated unpredictability can leave you feeling on guard, even on days when nothing happens. You may find it hard to relax at home because you have learned that things can change without warning. Not everyone responds in the same way, but that alertness can become exhausting.

This shows up in ways you may not have named yet. You may have become a person who startles easily, who has trouble sleeping, who cannot fully concentrate because part of your attention feels as though it is always somewhere else — monitoring, scanning, checking. You may notice that you are exhausted in a way that sleep does not fully fix. Ongoing vigilance can contribute to that exhaustion, even though fatigue can have other causes too.

You may have changed what you do, what you say, what you try, what you ask for, based on what you learned is safe and what is not. You may have become smaller. Not because you chose to — but because over time, in a system that responded to ordinary things with disproportionate reactions, making yourself smaller seemed like one way to reduce the risk of confrontation. Whether it actually changed the other person's behavior or not, you may have kept adjusting because you were trying to stay safe.

And you may have started to think of this as just who you are. The anxious one. The quiet one. The one who doesn't ask for much, who plans carefully, who reads people well, who keeps things smooth. Those may feel like character traits. Some of them may have always been there. But some of them grew in direct response to living inside something that required them of you.

Some of what you are describing may be how you learned to get through this relationship. It does not have to define who you are.

The difference matters. Some of those responses may have developed or intensified while you were trying to stay safe. That means they are not necessarily permanent. With time, greater safety, and support when it is available, some people find that the constant alertness eases. There is no single timetable, and ongoing danger matters.

That work is coming. This book will walk you through it.

For right now, what I need you to hear is this: the hypervigilance you carry is not a flaw. It is not evidence that something is wrong with you. It can be an understandable response to repeated unpredictability or frightening experiences. Scanning, calculating, and bracing are responses some people develop or experience more intensely under stress. They can change, although the path looks different for everyone and support may be needed. Those responses do not have to define the rest of your life.

What you have already done — finding ways to function inside something that kept wearing you down — took more out of you than most people will ever understand. The work ahead is different. That is worth something.

The next chapter is about something that tends to get conflated in ways that make everything harder to understand: behavior, harm, and diagnosis. These are not the same thing, and separating them matters — both for understanding what happened and for knowing how to talk about it.

Chapter 7 — Behavior, Harm, and Diagnosis Are Three Different Things

At some point, most people who have been in one of these relationships ask the same question.

Do they have narcissistic personality disorder?

And I understand why. When you have been living inside something this disorienting for this long, you want a name for it. You want something official, something that explains the pattern in a way that other people will recognize and take seriously. You want a word you can use that makes what happened real — not just in your own mind, but in the world.

The problem is that this question can become a trap. Not because the diagnosis does not exist, or because it does not matter — it can matter, in certain contexts. But when your ability to trust your own experience depends on someone else receiving a formal clinical diagnosis, you can end up waiting for an answer that may never come.

This chapter is about untangling three things that get collapsed into each other constantly, in ways that make everything harder to understand and harder to recover from.

What someone *is.* What they *do.* And what it *caused.*

Those are not the same thing. And learning to separate them is important, because you don’t need an answer to the first question to understand the other two.

What diagnosis actually is

A diagnosis is a clinical category. It describes a pattern of traits that a qualified mental health professional evaluates against established criteria. Getting a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder requires a clinical assessment, not a conclusion drawn from one relationship. The broader personality-disorder criteria describe enduring, inflexible, pervasive patterns associated with clinically significant distress or impairment in important areas of functioning.

Some people with significant narcissistic traits will never receive a formal diagnosis. Some never seek an evaluation. Others may not meet the full criteria for narcissistic personality disorder. And without that evaluation, you cannot know for certain.

So the person who caused the harm may never receive a formal diagnosis. And you are left holding the question: *if they were never officially diagnosed, does that mean I'm wrong about what happened?*

No. It does not.

What they did is a separate question from what they are

Here is the distinction that I want you to actually internalize, because it changes everything.

A behavior does not require a diagnosis to be real.

What was done to you — the gaslighting, the manipulation, the unpredictability, the erosion of your sense of self — happened. It happened whether or not the person who did it was ever evaluated by a clinician. It happened whether or not they would meet the full diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder. It happened whether or not they would score above a certain threshold on a clinical assessment tool you have never seen.

You may still be carrying the effects in your body. In the way you react to certain tones of voice, or find yourself over-explaining when you don't need to. Those reactions can tell you something important about what you've lived through. They don't require someone else's diagnosis to deserve attention.

The question *what are they* is a clinical question. It requires a trained professional, a full evaluation, time, and information you may not have access to.

The question *what did they do* is not a clinical question. You can describe what you witnessed and experienced. You can name the patterns. You do not need to diagnose another person to do that.

What it caused is a third thing entirely

The harm is also separate from both the diagnosis and the behavior.

You can know what someone did to you without ever knowing whether they have a personality disorder. And you can understand what that did to you — what it did to your sense of self, your ability to trust, your nervous system, your relationships — without that understanding depending on a clinical label.

The harm is real. It may not have been documented by anyone else, but its effects deserve attention. And it needs to be addressed on its own terms, not as a footnote to someone else's diagnosis.

This matters practically. When you spend your energy trying to get a definitive answer on what they *are*, your attention can stay focused on them. On proving the diagnosis. On making the case. On finding the right clinical language to describe someone whose evaluation, if any, you may never know about.

Meanwhile, when so much of your attention goes toward obtaining a diagnosis, the effects on your own life can go without the attention they deserve.

Why people get stuck waiting for the label

I have talked to thousands of people who have been in these relationships. And one of the most consistent patterns I see is this: people who cannot move forward because they are still waiting for confirmation.

Waiting for the other person to admit what they did. Waiting for a therapist to officially diagnose them. Waiting for someone who was there to finally say *yes, I see it too.* Waiting for the kind of external validation that would let them stop second-guessing what they already know.

The waiting makes sense. It is not weakness. Repeatedly having your perceptions challenged can make you seek reassurance from someone else before trusting yourself. That need for confirmation may feel especially strong after a long period of being doubted, even though people respond differently and you cannot always know the other person's motives.

But the confirmation you are waiting for may never come. The other person may not admit what happened. They may never receive a

diagnosis, and people who saw only part of the relationship may still struggle to understand what you lived.

And so the question becomes: what do you need in order to move forward without it?

What you do need

You do not need a diagnosis. But you do need language.

You need words for what happened — not necessarily clinical words, but accurate words. Words that describe the pattern you lived inside. Words that name the specific behaviors without requiring you to prove a clinical condition. Words that help you recognize the pattern so you can protect yourself from it in the future.

That is what this book is trying to give you. Not a diagnosis. Not a clinical verdict on someone who is not in this room. A framework for understanding what happened, in language you can actually use.

You also need to understand that your experience is valid on its own terms. Not because a professional confirmed it. Not because the person who caused the harm admitted it. Not because everyone around you finally understood.

Valid because it happened. Valid because you lived it. Valid because the effects are real and present and affecting you right now.

That is enough. That has always been enough.

When you have the name and you still stay

Here is something that does not get said enough.

Some people finally get the confirmation they have been looking for. A therapist helps them recognize the patterns. They find language for what they have been experiencing. Sometimes the person who caused the harm even has a formal diagnosis. And still, knowing what to call it doesn’t automatically change the relationship.

A diagnosis by itself does not make the behavior change. The patterns you have experienced do not disappear simply because someone has a clinical name for them. Whether anything changes depends on what the person actually does over time, not on the label alone.

Knowing what something is called does not change what it does to you. And it does not automatically change what you do about it.

If you finally got a diagnosis or a name for what was happening and still stayed, that does not make you stupid, weak, or in denial. Knowing the label may not change your feelings, your circumstances, or what leaving would require. You may still love them or hope things will improve. You may also be dealing with safety, finances, children, or barriers that knowledge alone does not remove.

That gap — between knowing something and being able to act on it — is one of the most human things there is. Repeatedly having your perceptions questioned can make trusting your judgment harder. Even when you receive information that supports your understanding, you may still need time, safety, practical options, and support before deciding what to do. That does not mean you failed to understand what happened.

That is not a character flaw. That is a scar that needs more than a word to heal.

If the other person received a formal diagnosis, that information may have helped you understand the situation. But it was never going to be enough on its own. Because you were not just dealing with a concept. You were dealing with a person, and a history, and a life you had built, and feelings that did not disappear because you finally understood where they came from.

The name is a starting point. It is not the finish line.

The difference between understanding and excusing

One more thing before we move on, because this question comes up constantly.

If you start to understand why someone behaves the way they do — if you read about narcissistic patterns, or personality development, or what childhood experiences can shape a person into — does that mean you have to excuse what they did?

No.

Understanding how something developed is not the same as saying it was acceptable. A person can have a genuinely difficult history and still be responsible for how they treat the people in their life. Those two things can both be true.

This matters because some people use the possibility of a diagnosis as a reason to stay, or to go back, or to tolerate ongoing harm. *They can't help it. They didn't choose to be this way.* And maybe that is true in some partial sense. But you did not choose to be treated the way you were treated either. And your well-being is not less important because theirs is complicated.

Understanding the pattern is for you. It is so you can recognize it, name it, make sense of what happened to you, and make better decisions going forward. It is not a reason to absorb more harm from the person who caused it.

The next chapter is about where this often starts — before you could make sense of it. The beginning, when everything felt like finally. When you felt seen and chosen and certain. And how that beginning can make it so difficult to recognize what comes afterward.

PART TWO: THE PATTERNS IN ACTION

Chapter 8 — Love Bombing: When It Feels Too Good to Be Real

Before anything else, before the confusion and the walking on eggshells and the trying to figure out what you did wrong this time — there was the beginning.

And the beginning felt extraordinary.

People sometimes feel embarrassed when they talk about the beginning later. They remember how completely they believed in it, how certain they felt, how quickly things moved, and how hard it would have been to imagine what came afterward. That embarrassment can be real, but it does not mean they should have known what would happen.

The beginning is not where you expect to find the problem. Sometimes, looking back at how the early attention unfolded — and what happened when you tried to slow things down — helps you recognize concerns you could not see then.

What it felt like

Think back to those first weeks or months.

They were attentive in a way that felt different from anyone before. Present in a way that felt different. They remembered things — things you mentioned once, in passing, things you would not have expected anyone to hold onto. They showed up. They made you feel like the most important person in the room, like you had their full attention in a way that felt both rare and completely natural, like this was just how it was going to be.

The pace of it was fast. Maybe faster than you would have chosen. But it did not feel rushed — it felt right. Like the two of you were simply moving at the speed of something real, something that did not need to follow the usual timeline because it was not like the usual thing.

They wanted to know everything about you. Your history, your family, what you had been through, what you wanted, what you had been missing. And they listened in a way that made you feel genuinely

known — maybe for the first time in a long time, maybe for the first time ever. There was an intimacy to those early conversations that felt almost startling, like something that should take years had arrived in weeks.

You felt chosen. Not just liked, not just wanted — chosen. Specifically and deliberately chosen, as if they had seen something in you that others had missed, and they wanted you to know they saw it.

That feeling is not nothing. It is not weakness. It is one of the most powerful feelings a human being can have. And it was real — the feeling was real, even if what produced it was not what you thought.

What was actually happening

There is a term for this: love bombing.

Love bombing is a term people use for overwhelming early attention, affection, or gifts that become part of a pattern of pressure or manipulation. Constant contact. Grand gestures. Declarations of commitment that arrive early. The concern is not simply how intense the beginning feels, but how that intensity is used and how the other person treats your choices.

Not every relationship that moves quickly is love bombing. Some people genuinely fall hard and fast. What matters is whether the intensity comes with pressure, whether your boundaries are respected, and what happens when you don't move at the same pace. The early attention becomes more concerning when saying no, asking for time, or expressing a different need changes how you're treated.

The intensity can have a powerful effect because it meets something real. The desire to be seen. The desire to be chosen. The need for connection that most people carry, especially after loneliness, hurt, or relationships where they felt invisible. Those needs are human. And when someone suddenly seems to meet all of them, it can become difficult to separate genuine connection from overwhelming attention.

Part of what can make an intense beginning so disorienting is how similar the other person seems to you. You may feel as though you have found someone who understands you completely — someone who shares your values, humor, and outlook. The connection can feel

almost uncanny, like meeting someone who already knew you. But feeling similar does not, by itself, tell you whether the similarity is genuine or deliberately presented.

Sometimes that similarity is genuine. People naturally connect through shared interests and values. In a harmful relationship, someone may also say what you want to hear or present a level of compatibility that their later behavior does not support. It can be hard to distinguish those possibilities early on, because what you experienced felt like connection. The difference becomes clearer through consistency, honesty, and respect for boundaries over time.

You were not imagining the connection. You were feeling something real. What you did not know — what you could not have known at the time — is that some of what you were connecting with may have been a reflection of yourself.

Why you could not have seen it

This is the part I need you to actually hear, because it is the part that most people skip past when they are trying to make sense of what happened.

You couldn't have known what would come later.

Not because you were naive. Not because you were desperate or damaged or not paying attention. You were responding to the person and the relationship as they appeared at the time. Some of the things that eventually became warning signs looked like affection, commitment, and compatibility in the beginning. And even if something felt too fast, that didn't tell you everything about who this person was or what would happen next.

The pace felt fast in retrospect. At the time, it felt like certainty. The intensity felt overwhelming in retrospect. At the time, it felt like passion. Hindsight makes it look obvious. But you were not living in hindsight. You were living in what was directly in front of you, and what was directly in front of you looked like something real.

That is why I will not let you use what happened at the beginning as evidence of something wrong with you.

What mirroring takes from you

If you later discover that some of the similarity you believed in was not genuine, that discovery can bring grief. You may grieve the relationship you thought you had, even if you never get complete answers about what was real.

If someone appeared to share your values, your humor, and your way of seeing things, that sense of similarity may have shaped what you fell in love with. If later experiences made you question how much was genuine, you may find yourself revisiting those early conversations and wondering what you really knew about each other.

That can be a real loss. The person you thought you knew — the person who seemed to understand you so completely, who matched you so well, who felt like someone you had been waiting for — may not have been exactly who you believed they were. And you may find yourself asking: *but it felt real. It was real to me. Does that mean none of it was?* You do not have to settle every question about their intentions to take your own feelings seriously.

None of it being real and some of it being real are not the only two options. What you felt was real. What they showed you may have been a construction. Both things can be true at the same time.

And understanding that — sitting with the grief of it without letting it collapse into shame — is part of the work.

The shame that is not yours

Here is where I want to be direct with you.

The shame that tends to come later — the shame of having believed it, of having fallen for it, of having let it get as far as it did — that shame is not yours to carry.

You didn’t believe in the relationship because you were foolish. You responded to affection, attention, and promises that appeared genuine. Trusting someone who presents themselves as trustworthy is not a character flaw. And discovering later that the relationship wasn’t what you believed doesn’t make you responsible for how you were treated.

There is no single type of person who ends up in a harmful relationship. People who are grounded, accomplished, careful, or experienced can find themselves in one. So can people with very different childhoods and relationship histories. Knowing the warning signs does not guarantee that someone will treat you well. Being hurt does not mean you were damaged, desperate, or responsible for what happened.

Being inside it is different from understanding it from the outside. And you were inside it.

The shame belongs to the pattern. It belongs to the way this dynamic operates. It does not belong to you for having been human enough to want to be loved, and to have believed, for a while, that you were.

The next chapter is about what comes after the beginning — the first time something felt off and you talked yourself out of it, the small adjustments you started making without realizing you were making them, and what those adjustments were actually telling you.

Chapter 9 — The Shift: When Things Start to Change

Maybe there was a moment. Maybe you remember it clearly, or only in pieces.

The first time something felt off. The first time a small voice in the back of your mind said *wait* — and then you talked yourself out of it.

Maybe it was the way they reacted to something you said. A coldness that came and went so fast you were not sure you had read it right. Maybe it was a comment that landed wrong — something that felt like a small cut, something you would have reacted to if someone else had said it, but you let it pass because this was them and surely you were misreading it. Maybe it was a moment where you wanted to slow down and you felt, clearly but briefly, that slowing down was not really an option.

You noticed. And then you let it go.

That is not weakness. When a relationship still has warmth, one troubling moment may not seem enough to outweigh what you have experienced. You may have filed it away, forgotten it, or found a reason it made sense at the time.

And then it happened again.

The first time something felt off

The first sign rarely announces itself as a sign.

It tends to be small. A tone that was sharper than the situation called for. A reaction that was bigger than the thing that caused it. A moment where you said something ordinary and the response was not ordinary at all — and you spent the next hour trying to figure out what you had done.

Or it was the absence of something. The warmth that was always there suddenly wasn’t, for a day or an afternoon, and you could not identify why. And you found yourself working to get it back — being funnier,

more attentive, more careful — without having been told anything was wrong.

One response to that moment is to look inward. You may ask yourself what you did, go back over the conversation, and search for something that explains the shift. When someone you care about pulls away or turns cold, it can be natural to wonder whether something you did played a part.

In a relationship where concerns can be discussed safely, you may be able to ask what changed and work through a misunderstanding. In the pattern described here, you may not be given that chance. Sometimes there is no clear reason you can identify for the shift, no matter how carefully you look. Repeatedly searching for an explanation can itself leave you distressed and doubting your judgment.

The adjustments you started making

At some point, without fully realizing it, you started changing.

Small things at first. You chose your words more carefully around certain topics. You learned which moods called for humor and which called for quiet. You stopped mentioning certain things — not because anyone told you not to, but because you had noticed, without naming it, that bringing them up tended to go badly. You got better at reading the temperature of a room before you walked all the way into it.

None of these felt like adjustments at the time. They felt like being a thoughtful partner. Like learning someone. Like the natural process of figuring out how to live alongside another person.

But there is a difference between learning someone because you love them and learning someone because you are managing them. Between adjusting because you want to and adjusting because the cost of not adjusting is too high. That difference is very hard to feel from the inside, especially in the early stages, because the behavior looks the same either way. You are paying attention. You are being careful. You are adapting.

The question is what you are adapting to.

If you think back now, you can probably identify the moment when the adjustments started feeling less like love and more like strategy. When

you stopped doing certain things not because you didn't want to do them, but because you had learned they would cost you something. When you started calculating before you spoke instead of just speaking.

That shift — from loving to managing — can be a sign that something in the relationship has changed. It may happen gradually enough that you do not recognize it until you have been making those adjustments for a while.

Why you talked yourself out of it

When the signs showed up, you had reasons to dismiss them. Good reasons. Reasons that made sense at the time.

You loved them. That is not a small thing. When you love someone, you extend them the benefit of the doubt. You interpret their behavior charitably. You assume the best version of events, because assuming the worst feels like a betrayal of the relationship you are trying to build.

You also had evidence on the other side. The good moments were real. The person who made you feel seen and chosen at the beginning had not disappeared — they still showed up, regularly, in ways that reminded you exactly why you were there. You had seen who they could be. You had felt it. And that made every difficult moment feel like an exception rather than a pattern.

And you probably got some help dismissing the signs. Maybe directly — *you're too sensitive, you're reading into it, that's not what I meant* — or indirectly, through the way things smoothed over so quickly after a rough patch that there was never quite time to examine what had happened before things were good again.

All of this made sense. All of it was understandable. And when you look back now, those moments may seem much clearer than they did when you were living through them. At the time, you didn't have the full pattern in front of you. You were still trying to understand what was happening.

Intermittent reinforcement

There is a concept worth understanding here. It may help explain why good moments can sometimes make a painful relationship harder to make sense of, rather than easier.

In psychology, intermittent reinforcement means that a response is rewarded some of the time rather than every time. In a relationship, warmth or reassurance may also come unpredictably, and that can affect what you hope for or keep trying to restore. But inconsistent affection alone does not prove that a particular reinforcement schedule is operating or that someone planned it.

When warmth and reassurance become unpredictable, you can find yourself working harder to get them back. You start paying more attention to the good moments because you don't know when the next one will come. And when that warmth finally returns, the relief can make it harder to confront what happened before it.

For some people, the good moments do not make the painful ones easier. They can make leaving feel more complicated, because leaving also means giving up moments of warmth and the hope that those moments might last. That can be part of the picture, not the only reason someone stays.

If you stayed, that does not mean you were weak, naive, or unable to think clearly. You may have loved them and hoped things would improve. You may also have been weighing safety, money, children, housing, or the consequences of leaving. More than one thing can be true, and no single explanation captures everyone's reasons.

The good moments were real. That is the whole point. And those good moments were mixed in with the painful ones, making it harder to know whether you were watching the relationship fall apart or waiting for it to get better.

What the adjustments were telling you

Here is the thing about the changes you made without noticing.

They were information.

Every time you softened something before you said it, chose not to bring something up, or went quiet when you wanted to speak, you may have been responding to what you had experienced in the relationship. Sometimes those adjustments happen before you have fully named the reason for them. They are worth noticing, not treating as proof by themselves.

Those adjustments may not have been random. You may have made them after particular conversations or reactions, hoping to avoid another confrontation. Looking at when they happened and what preceded them can help you understand the pattern without assuming that every adjustment had the same cause.

Those adjustments do not mean you were oversensitive, dramatic, or hard to please. They may reflect what you had noticed and learned in the relationship. Looking at the situations that led to them can help you understand what was happening.

That is worth sitting with. Because one of the things that happens inside this dynamic is that you start to distrust the information your own behavior is giving you. You make an adjustment and then wonder why you made it. You catch yourself choosing your words carefully and tell yourself you're being paranoid. You notice that you're managing someone and talk yourself out of what you noticed.

Your adjustments were trying to tell you something. It took a long time to hear it. That is not a failure. That is what it looks like to be human inside a relationship where what you experienced and what you were being told kept pulling you in different directions.

The next chapter is about the promises — the ones that came when things got bad enough that something had to be said. I'm going to change. Just give me one more chance. This time it will be different. What those promises sounded like, what happened after they were made, and why they could be so hard to stop believing.

Chapter 10 — Future Faking: The Promises That Were Never Real

You had a version of this conversation. Maybe more than once.

Things had gotten bad enough that you said something. Maybe you pulled back, or you cried, or you told them directly that this was not working, that something had to change, that you could not keep going like this. And they heard you. Really heard you, or seemed to — and what came back was everything you had needed to hear.

I know. You're right. I've been thinking about this too. I want to do better. I'm going to do better. Things are going to be different.

And you believed them. Or you wanted to believe them, which at the time felt like the same thing.

This is not a failure of judgment. When someone you love tells you they see the problem and they want to fix it, believing them is the reasonable response. That is what you do with people you trust. You take them at their word, especially when they seem genuinely remorseful, especially when the warmth is back, especially when you are standing at the edge of leaving and they are giving you a reason to stay.

The problem is not that you believed. The problem is what kept happening after the promises.

What future faking sounds like

Future faking is a pattern in which promises about the future repeatedly become a substitute for meaningful change in the present. The promises may sound convincing, and some improvement may follow. But when the same harmful behavior keeps returning, those promises can become part of what keeps the relationship going without resolving the problem.

It can sound like commitment. It can sound like accountability. Sometimes those promises arrive when you have reached your limit, when you are pulling away, or when the relationship is in enough

trouble that something has to change. The timing can make them especially hard to evaluate.

The promises may be big. They may grow more detailed when the relationship is in trouble: a timeline, a plan, specific changes, the future you have wanted. If you were considering leaving, those details could give you something concrete to hope for. But the size of a promise does not, by itself, tell you whether it will be kept.

It can be specific enough to feel real. And when someone seems sincere in the moment, it can be very hard to know whether the promise will hold.

The form it takes can differ. Sometimes it is an apology and a list of changes. Sometimes a grand gesture — a gift, a trip, something offered as a sign that this is serious. Sometimes there are tears, and those can be difficult to make sense of when you want to believe a person is ready to change. Sometimes it is a quiet *I hear you. I'm going to work on this.* No drama, no spectacle — just the words you needed to hear.

What happens after

Sometimes things get better for a while after a promise. Sometimes they do not.

When promises are followed by better behavior, even briefly, the improvement can feel meaningful. They may become more attentive or careful, and the behavior that hurt you may seem to stop. That can make it harder to know whether change will last or how to hold a boundary you still need. But a period of improvement does not, by itself, establish lasting accountability.

That improvement might last days, weeks, or longer. If things seem better, you may begin to relax or hope the original problem has been resolved. But the length of a better period does not, by itself, show what will happen next.

But when that same behavior returns, it may happen gradually or suddenly.

Sometimes things return to where they were. Sometimes they are slightly better for a while, which can make the pattern harder to name. The behavior you said could not happen again happens again. You

gave them another chance, and now you have to decide what that return means for you.

This is the cycle. It runs as many times as it runs. For some people, each repetition makes leaving harder. There is more time invested, more hope attached to the brief improvements, and more uncertainty about whether the next promise will finally hold. For others, those repetitions become the reason they stop believing the promises altogether.

Why the promises were so hard to stop believing

Part of it is hope. You wanted it to be true. You wanted the person you fell in love with to be who they were promising to be. And that want is not something to be ashamed of — it is one of the most human things there is.

Part of it may be what you saw. Sometimes a promise is followed by a genuine improvement, even if the improvement does not last. That can make it harder to dismiss what was said and harder to know what to expect next. People around you may offer hopeful interpretations, while others may see reasons for concern. You were trying to make sense of what actually happened.

Part of it may have been what staying and leaving each involved. Staying could mean holding onto a familiar life and the future you hoped would improve. Leaving could mean grief, the loss of a relationship you valued, and major practical decisions. Safety, money, housing, children, support, and the risk of retaliation may also have mattered. Believing a promise was not weakness. And leaving was never as simple as deciding whether to believe it.

Sometimes another part of the pressure is what you were told about your own response. You may have been called too sensitive, too unforgiving, too quick to give up, or unable to let things go. If any of that got under your skin, leaving could start to feel like proof they were right about you. Trying again may have felt like a way to prove they were wrong. That was not the only reason someone might stay, but it can be one part of the burden.

That is a very heavy thing to be carrying while you are trying to decide whether to believe someone.

What the promises were for

A promise that does not lead to sustained change does not tell you, by itself, what the person intended when they made it. They may have hoped to change, may have underestimated what change required, or may have been trying to prevent the relationship from ending. You cannot establish which explanation fits solely from the promise. What you can examine is whether the harmful behavior changed over time.

What matters for you is not proving which explanation was true. What matters is what happened after the promises and what their repetition meant for your choices.

In some relationships, a promise gives someone a reason to stay or to postpone a decision while they watch for change. That may allow the same harmful pattern to continue if the behavior returns. In others, repeated broken promises become the reason someone stops believing them. The effect depends on what actually happened; it cannot be assumed from the promise alone.

You may not know what the other person intended. But if promises repeatedly led you to hope for change while the same harm returned, you can recognize that pattern without blaming yourself for taking the promises seriously. Trusting a promise is not evidence that your judgment is defective. What matters is what happened afterward and whether meaningful change lasted.

What believing the promises cost you

If you kept believing promises that did not hold, the disappointment may have affected how you saw the relationship and what you expected next.

For some people, repeated promises followed by the same harm can change what feels safe to bring up. Another argument, another promise, another brief improvement, and little lasting change can become exhausting. You may have found yourself speaking up less, or holding back things that mattered. Other people respond differently.

What matters is how that repeated pattern affected your choices and sense of safety.

Repeated promises and disappointments can also leave you questioning your judgment. You may wonder whether you were too hopeful or whether you missed something important. That doubt can be painful. But believing someone who promised to change does not, by itself, mean you were incapable of judging what was real.

You can learn to trust your judgment again. Repeated promises and disappointments may have made it harder to know what to believe. Each time you hoped the change would last, you were responding to something that had been promised to you. That does not mean your judgment was defective.

The next chapter is about what happens to your ability to trust your own mind — the specific ways that reality starts to get replaced, the phrases that do it, and what it does to you over time.

Chapter 11 — Gaslighting: When You Stop Trusting Your Own Mind

You remember it differently than they do.

That is where it starts — a small disagreement about what happened. What was said, what was meant, whether something occurred at all. And the first few times it happens, you do not think much of it. People remember things differently. Memory is imperfect. Maybe you got the detail wrong.

But it keeps happening. And each time it happens, the version that wins is theirs.

Not necessarily because they are right or have better recall. Sometimes the certainty of their version — delivered quickly, without room for doubt or discussion — can make your own memory feel unstable by comparison. And after repeated exchanges like that, you may start to wonder: *am I the one who gets things wrong?*

When that becomes a repeated pattern, and your memory is consistently the one being dismissed, the effect can reach far beyond a disagreement about what happened. You can begin questioning your own ability to remember and understand events. That is the kind of pattern this chapter is about: gaslighting. And by the time you are asking that question, it has probably been happening for a while.

What it is

Gaslighting is a pattern of manipulation in which someone repeatedly denies or distorts your account of events, often within an unequal or controlling relationship, in ways that can undermine trust in your own perceptions.

It is not a single argument. It is not simply one person insisting they remember something differently. In the harmful pattern this chapter describes, repeated denials or distortions can make you question your perceptions over time. You can examine that pattern without proving what the other person intended in every exchange.

The word comes from a 1944 film in which a husband manipulates his wife into believing she is losing her mind, partly by dimming the gas lights in their home and then denying that the lights have changed at all. The specific method is less important than what it does: it makes the person experiencing the manipulation doubt the evidence of their own senses.

In some relationships, the pattern plays out through ordinary details of shared life. Through repeated challenges to your memory of conversations, your interpretation of events, or your read on situations. Over time, those challenges can shake your confidence in what you experienced.

What it sounds like

Some phrases may become familiar in this pattern. The words alone are not proof; how they are used and whether your concerns can be discussed matter more.

That never happened. Said with complete certainty, about something you are certain happened. No hedging, no wondering — just a flat denial that leaves you holding the memory alone.

I never said that. About something you heard. Something you remember clearly. And yet here is the absolute counter-claim, delivered as if your memory is simply not credible.

You're remembering it wrong. Which sounds reasonable — everyone misremembers things — but when the response repeatedly places the error entirely with you and leaves no room to examine what happened, it can become part of the pattern.

You're too sensitive. After something that hurt you. The implication being that the hurt is a defect in you rather than a reasonable response to what happened.

You're overreacting. Same function. What you felt is too much. The appropriate response would be smaller. You are, by implication, not calibrated correctly.

That's not what I meant. Which may sometimes be true. But when it is used to dismiss what you actually heard, to replace your experience of

a conversation with their account of their intention, it removes your reality from the room and replaces it with theirs.

You always do this. Turning a specific moment into a pattern of behavior that belongs to you — something you always do, something that is simply your character, something that explains why this keeps happening. The subject changes from what just occurred to who you are.

No one else would put up with you. The end of the road. Not just that you are wrong in this moment — but that you are, fundamentally, too much. That the relationship itself is a gift you should be grateful for.

None of these phrases is proof of gaslighting on its own. People say some of these things in ordinary disagreements. Look at the repeated behavior: whether your account is dismissed or distorted, whether concerns can be discussed honestly, and whether the pattern pressures you to doubt your own perceptions. The effect matters, but it does not have to look the same for everyone.

How the stories change

One of the most disorienting parts of this pattern is not the denial of single moments. It is the way entire accounts shift.

You have a difficult conversation. Something significant is said — something that matters, something that changes things. And then, later, the conversation gets referenced — and what gets referenced is not what you remember. Details have changed. The sequence is different. What you heard as a threat is described as concern. What you experienced as an ultimatum is recalled as a simple observation. The event that you have been carrying since it happened is presented back to you in a form that makes your response to it seem unreasonable.

And you may be left trying to hold two versions of the same event in your head at the same time. Yours and theirs. Sometimes you have no recording, witness, or document to settle it. Sometimes you do have something to refer to, and the disagreement continues anyway. What makes it difficult is not simply the absence of proof but the repeated refusal to take your account seriously.

Over time, this may change how you talk about your memories. You might start saying *I think you said something like…* instead of *you said this.* You might qualify things you still remember clearly because you expect your account to be challenged. And to someone listening, those qualifiers can sound like doubt even when you are trying to avoid another argument.

Sometimes you still remember clearly, but you have learned to soften your words to avoid another argument. Other times, the repeated challenges have left you genuinely unsure. Either way, you can find yourself defending your right to remember what happened rather than discussing the event itself.

The events that never happened

There is a specific version of this that deserves its own space: the flat denial of something you know occurred.

Not a disagreement about interpretation. Not a different memory of the same event. A complete denial that it happened at all. *That never happened. I never did that. You are making things up.*

When something significant is denied outright, it can be shocking. You were there. You remember. And the denial may be so complete, so certain, so free of acknowledgment that your account deserves consideration, that you begin questioning your memory — even if you had been sure of what happened.

Whether the denial is deliberate or not, it can be deeply destabilizing. You may find yourself questioning something you remember experiencing.

If you have lived with repeated denials, you may have started keeping records. Saving messages. Writing things down while the conversation was fresh, so you had something to refer to later. That can be an understandable response when your account keeps being questioned. You may have been trying to hold onto evidence because your account kept being dismissed. But if someone monitors your phone, accounts, or belongings, storing records may create a safety risk. Your safety matters more than proving a point.

What it does over time

For some people, the effects accumulate. They may also extend beyond disagreements about particular events.

Over time, gaslighting can leave some people uncertain about their own perceptions. It may go beyond doubting one conversation. You may find yourself questioning your instincts, your sense of when something is wrong, or your ability to interpret situations. Other people remain clear about what happened even while facing repeated denials.

You may find that you stopped trusting yourself in ways that go beyond the relationship. That you second-guess yourself at work, with friends, in situations that have nothing to do with the person who caused this. That you over-explain things, as if you are always pre-defending your account against a challenge that may not come. That you apologize more than you used to, for things that do not require an apology, because somewhere along the way you learned that your version of events was likely to be wrong.

If your confidence changed during the relationship, that change may have developed gradually as your account was challenged again and again. You may recognize it as different from how you responded before. But people bring different histories into relationships, and not everyone experiences the same effects.

Scholars sometimes describe part of this experience as epistemic harm: interference with your confidence in what you know or with whether others treat your account as credible. This is an explanatory concept, not a clinical diagnosis or proof that your memory is defective. The effects can extend into other areas of life, though they do not do so for everyone.

What made it so hard to name

Gaslighting can be especially difficult to recognize when someone repeatedly uses ordinary uncertainty about memory or interpretation to dismiss what you experienced. You may be trying to stay fair while also trying to make sense of a repeated pattern.

You may know that memory is imperfect. You may understand that two people can remember the same event differently. You may even

question whether your reaction fit the situation. Those are ordinary ways of trying to be fair. But when your willingness to question yourself repeatedly becomes the reason your account is dismissed, it can be difficult to tell an honest disagreement from a harmful pattern.

A different memory is not, by itself, gaslighting. Neither is one comment that you are too sensitive. What deserves attention is a repeated pattern in which your account is dismissed or distorted, your concerns go unanswered, and you keep being pressured to accept that your perceptions are unreliable. The details may vary; the repeated treatment of your account is what matters.

Patterns are hard to see when you are living inside them, day by day, moment by moment. Each individual instance seems like a disagreement. It is only when you step back — when you get distance, or talk to someone outside the relationship, or start writing things down — that the shape of it becomes visible.

What it means that you are reading this

If this chapter is landing — if you are reading these phrases and recognizing them, if you are remembering specific moments that fit this pattern — that is information.

Your recognition is not proof of anything. It does not diagnose anyone. But it is data about your own experience that is worth taking seriously.

Recognizing these patterns does not mean every detail of every memory has to be perfect. It means you are paying attention to what you experienced and asking questions that deserve to be taken seriously. You can acknowledge that memory is imperfect without automatically assuming yours is wrong whenever someone challenges it.

Your mind is not the problem. What was done to it is the problem. And the two things are not the same.

The next chapter is about infidelity — and how denial and counter-accusation can sometimes complicate what happens afterward. The flat denial when you have evidence. The stories that keep changing. And the way a conversation about their behavior can become a conversation about yours.

Chapter 12 — The Cheating Pattern: Denial, Accusation, and Making You Feel Crazy

Sometimes you noticed something was wrong long before you had proof of what it was.

Something had changed. The attention felt different. The explanations didn't quite add up. You noticed things you couldn't easily explain, and you tried to make sense of them. You didn't know everything yet. You knew something needed an honest conversation, and getting one wasn't easy.

What happened after — the conversation you tried to have, the explanation you got, the way it turned — is what this chapter is about. Infidelity or the suspicion of it can be painful on its own. In some relationships, the denials, changing accounts, and accusations that follow add another kind of harm: uncertainty about what to believe and whether your concerns will ever get an honest answer.

The flat denial

You brought it up. Maybe directly, maybe carefully, maybe after weeks of trying to find the right moment. And what you got back was a denial.

Not a complicated denial. Not one that acknowledged the concern and tried to address it. A flat one. *That is not happening. I don't know where you are getting this. You are wrong.*

Delivered with a certainty that was hard to argue with. Because certainty does not need evidence — it just needs to be consistent and unwavering. And theirs was. While you were sitting with your instincts, your observations, the things that had not added up — they were giving you a clean, unqualified no.

And part of you wanted to believe it. Because the possibility of infidelity was painful to consider. They were offering a version in

which nothing was happening and everything was fine. You could accept that account, even while some questions remained unanswered.

Some people accept the denial for a while. They may want to believe it, or feel exhausted by uncertainty. But a denial on its own does not prove what happened either way. What matters is whether the concerns can be examined honestly and whether the explanations remain consistent with what becomes known.

The stories that change

In some cases, as new information surfaces, the story changes. And instead of bringing clarity, each new account can leave you with more questions.

It was nothing. It was someone from work. It was an old friend. It was a conversation that got out of hand but nothing happened. Each explanation changes the story. And each time, you are asked to accept the new version before the contradictions in the last one have been addressed.

And then something else surfaces, or the timeline does not hold, or the version they gave you last week does not match what they are saying this week. And you point that out. And the story adjusts again.

A changing explanation does not automatically prove deception. But when important details keep shifting, especially as new information comes to light, it becomes difficult to know what account to trust. Instead of receiving a clear explanation, you are left trying to reconcile one version with the next.

Meanwhile, you may be keeping track. Mentally cataloguing what was said when, what matches and what does not, what has been admitted and what has been denied. You did not enter the relationship wanting to investigate your partner. When answers keep changing or your concerns keep being dismissed, it can feel as though you have to assemble the story yourself. That does not mean you are responsible for proving everything, or that checking devices and private accounts is safe or necessary.

The accusations that come back

Here is where it turns in a direction that many people are not prepared for.

You raise a concern. You have a question, or evidence, or just a feeling you cannot shake. In some conversations, the subject changes. Suddenly you are the problem. You are jealous. You are insecure. You go through their things, you check their phone, you do not trust them, you have never trusted anyone. The relationship is hard because of you. They cannot live like this.

This is the reversal. The conversation that started about their behavior has become a conversation about yours. And now you are defending yourself — explaining why you looked, why you asked, why your concern was reasonable — instead of getting any kind of answer to the original question.

That reversal can pull you into defending yourself instead of getting an answer. You may back up. You may soften the concern. Or you may keep asking questions. The problem is that the conversation can end up focused on your reaction while the original issue remains unanswered.

And the original question never got answered.

What it does to your sense of reality

When denial, changing accounts, and accusations repeat, they can affect how you understand the relationship and your own judgment.

For some people, it raises doubts that spread beyond the original concern. Others remain clear about what they saw, even while struggling to get an honest answer.

Because if you were wrong about this — if the thing you felt in your gut, that you built a whole case around, that you were certain about — if that turned out to be, according to them, a product of your insecurity and your jealousy and your inability to trust — then what else are you wrong about? What else is your paranoia? What else is your problem rather than theirs?

This is where the response to suspected cheating can become part of a gaslighting pattern. When repeated denials, changing stories, and

attacks on your judgment leave you questioning your ability to understand what happened, the damage can extend far beyond the original concern.

You were not wrong to ask questions when things stopped making sense. You deserved honest answers, not accusations that turned your concern into the problem. Even if you didn't have every fact, you still had the right to take repeated contradictions and dismissive responses seriously.

The timeline that does not add up

There is a specific experience that people in this situation describe, and it is worth naming directly.

You may start paying attention to time when explanations no longer add up. The hour that cannot be accounted for. The errand that took longer than expected. A phone that is suddenly face-down, on silent, or protected by a new passcode. Those observations may prompt a question, but none of them, alone, establishes that someone is cheating.

You notice these things and you file them away, because you have learned that bringing them up directly does not get you information — it gets you a denial and a conversation about your trust issues. So you watch. You add things up. You build a picture from the outside of something you should be able to see clearly from the inside.

That is not the kind of uncertainty anyone hopes to manage in a relationship. If you found yourself tracking details and trying to reconcile conflicting accounts, that may reflect how difficult the situation had become. It does not mean surveillance was your only option or that you had to prove infidelity before deciding what you needed.

What you deserved instead

You deserved a direct answer. You deserved to have your concern taken seriously instead of turned back on you. You deserved a partner who could discuss what happened honestly, including acknowledging harm if they had crossed a boundary, rather than leaving you alone with contradictory answers.

Not receiving an honest response may have cost you something. You may have begun doubting your instincts, or wondering whether you could judge a situation accurately. You may also have remained certain about what you saw and felt hurt by the refusal to discuss it. Those effects matter, and they do not have to be permanent.

Whether infidelity happened once, happened repeatedly, or was never established, prolonged uncertainty can leave a mark. Some people struggle to trust their own judgment long afterward. Others respond differently. You do not need to settle every unanswered question to take the way you were treated seriously.

The next chapter is about accusations that seem to mirror behavior you have seen from the person making them. Sometimes that is described as projection. But an accusation alone cannot tell you what the accuser has done or why they said it. We are going to look at what you can recognize without guessing what happens inside their mind.

Chapter 13 — Projection: Carrying What Belongs to Them

You were accused of lying when you were the one trying to get the truth.

You were accused of cheating, sometimes without knowing whether the other person had been unfaithful. You were accused of being selfish after years of rearranging your life around someone else's needs. You were accused of being manipulative while trying to address conversations that kept turning back on you. Those accusations may resemble behavior you have seen from the other person. The resemblance alone does not prove what they did.

And you defended yourself. You explained. You produced evidence. You tried to demonstrate, clearly and carefully, that the accusation was not accurate — because you believed that if you could just show them the truth, the conversation would end differently. That if you laid out the facts, the issue would be resolved.

In this pattern, the conversation did not resolve the concern. It shifted. And then it shifted again.

What projection is

In psychology, projection describes attributing one's own qualities, feelings, or impulses to somebody else. It is often discussed as a defense mechanism, but researchers and clinicians use the concept in different ways. An accusation alone cannot establish that projection has occurred, or whether the person making it recognized the same quality in themselves.

In a harmful relationship, accusations can repeatedly pull a conversation away from the behavior you wanted to address. This can go on for years. It may resemble what people call projection, but the repeated redirection is what you can observe. You do not have to know the psychological reason for the accusation to recognize that your concern went unanswered.

Projection involves attributing something uncomfortable in yourself to someone else. But from the outside, you cannot always know whether an accusation comes from projection, deliberate deflection, or another explanation. What you can recognize is the pattern: you raise a concern about their behavior, and suddenly you are defending yourself against accusations that resemble what they have been doing.

Someone who had lied to you accused you of being dishonest. Someone who repeatedly controlled where you went, who you saw, or how money was spent accused you of being controlling. Someone who kept changing their account accused you of hiding things. And someone accused you of cheating, even though you did not know whether they had been unfaithful themselves. When you can establish the behavior, you can name the contradiction. An accusation alone is not proof of a hidden act.

And each time, you engaged with it as though it were a real accusation requiring a real defense.

Why it works

You engaged with it because it felt real. The accusation landed with the same emotional weight as a real accusation. Your name was attached to it. You felt the same discomfort you would feel if the accusation were true, even when it wasn't.

An accusation from someone who matters to you can feel threatening or upsetting, especially if earlier conversations have ended badly. You may feel an urge to defend yourself immediately. Other people respond with anger, withdrawal, or calm questioning. None of those reactions, by itself, tells you whether the accusation is true.

You responded. You defended yourself. And the conversation may have shifted toward your behavior, your character, your intentions. The concern you raised could end up unanswered.

When an accusation redirects the conversation, you can end up defending your character instead of discussing the original concern. That is a form of deflection, whether or not projection explains it. Sometimes the original issue is revisited. Sometimes it remains

unanswered. The distinction matters because you can describe what happened without claiming to know why the person did it.

What it felt like from inside

If you lived inside this for a long time, there is probably a particular feeling you recognize — a kind of bracing before you spoke. A quick internal calculation: *how is what I'm about to say going to come back at me?*

You got careful. You got precise. You started working out ahead of time whether a true thing you wanted to say could somehow be twisted into something it wasn't. You chose your words with that twist in mind, pre-emptively. You got exhausted from the effort.

Some people describe starting to believe the accusations. Not all of them, but some. When you are told over and over that you are jealous, controlling, or dishonest, those words can start shaping how you see yourself. You may wonder if you really are too suspicious, too sensitive, too much. Or you may know the accusations are unfair and still be exhausted by having to answer them.

Your concerns deserved to be taken seriously. Having questions didn't make you controlling or unreasonable. And even when you didn't have every answer, you still had the right to examine behavior that was affecting your trust.

The pattern across time

A repeated series of accusations may be worth examining across time. Sometimes the charges resemble behavior you have independently observed from the person making them. Other times they do not. The pattern can tell you something about how conflict is handled, but it does not by itself identify a hidden act or an unconscious defense mechanism.

For example, someone who has lied about money might accuse you of hiding expenses. Someone who has restricted your choices might describe you as controlling for setting a boundary. Or you might be accused of cheating without knowing whether the other person has been unfaithful. In each case, separate what you can establish from what you suspect. The accusation does not settle the facts.

Looking back, you may notice accusations that resemble other behavior you witnessed. You may also find contradictions you cannot resolve. That is information to consider alongside what you know, not a map that proves secret behavior. You do not have to show that every accusation was projection to take repeated blame shifting seriously.

What defending yourself cost you

If you spent a long time defending yourself against repeated accusations, there may have been costs you did not recognize at the time:

Repeated accusations can affect your certainty about your own character. When someone close to you repeatedly describes you in ways that do not match how you understand yourself, those accusations may begin to affect how you see yourself. Even when you know they are unfair, defending against them over and over can be exhausting.

It may have made you question your own boundaries or reactions. When a reasonable concern is repeatedly called jealousy, or a limit is described as controlling, some people begin second-guessing themselves. Others remain clear about what they meant while becoming exhausted by the argument.

It may have cost you time and energy. Conversations that kept turning into defenses of your character could leave less space for addressing what mattered to you. That time and effort deserve to be acknowledged.

It may have cost you relationships. When misleading stories about you are shared with friends or family, some people may begin treating you differently or pull away. That loss can be real. But a disagreement or an accusation inside the relationship does not, by itself, prove that anyone spread those stories.

You were not the problem you were described as

This needs to be said directly, even though it can be hard to absorb after spending years inside the story that cast you differently.

The need for honesty was not controlling. It was a reasonable expectation in a relationship.

The asking of questions was not an attack. It was an attempt to understand what was happening.

You can question the person the accusations described. You were trying to understand what was happening, and repeated accusations may have made that harder. Labels that kept pulling attention away from the original concern do not settle who was right or wrong. You can look at what you actually did, what you actually said, and how you treated people without accepting every description someone placed on you.

What to do with this now

You do not need to go back and relitigate every argument. You do not need to build the case or make the map or prove each accusation was projection. Some of that you may never be able to verify. And spending your energy on the proof is spending your energy in the wrong direction.

What matters now is this: you are allowed to look back at who you were told you were and decide whether that description fits. You are allowed to separate what you have actually done, what you believe, and what you value from labels someone repeatedly placed on you. You do not have to know why the accusations were made to question whether they were fair.

That is not revisionism or denial. It is the work of examining your own actions honestly while separating them from labels that may not fit.

That work takes time. It is not a single moment of realization. You can start by understanding what projection means while keeping a clear distinction between the accusations you heard, the behavior you witnessed, and the motives you cannot verify. You do not have to accept a false description of yourself to leave those questions open.

The next chapter is about another form of control — the one that arrives as absence. When silence becomes the punishment, and you learn to live managing your behavior around the possibility of it.

Chapter 14 — The Silent Treatment: When Silence Becomes a Weapon

You sent the message. You waited. Nothing came back.

You sent another one. Shorter. More careful. Worded differently so it wouldn't land wrong. Still nothing. You checked your phone again. You checked whether the message had delivered. You went back and looked at what you'd originally said, trying to find the thing that had caused this, trying to identify the word or the tone that had been the problem so you could fix it.

Nothing. Hours. Then a full day.

You didn't know when contact would resume. You didn't know whether the disagreement would ever be discussed. You only knew you were left waiting without an explanation, going back over what you'd said and wondering what it would take to hear from them again.

What the silent treatment is

People often use "the silent treatment" to describe being ignored or shut out, especially after a disagreement. But withdrawal can happen for different reasons. Someone may be overwhelmed and need space. Someone may be avoiding a difficult conversation. Silence can also be used to pressure or punish. The important questions are what keeps happening, whether the concern can be addressed, and how the withdrawal affects the relationship.

The difference is not simply whether someone gives you a timeline. It is how the silence functions in the relationship. Taking space allows someone to pause a difficult conversation without using disconnection as a penalty. Punishing silence leaves you excluded, uncertain, or pressured to give in, while the original problem remains unresolved.

The distinction is important. A pause that protects a person's capacity to talk is different from a recurring pattern that shuts down discussion and pressures someone to give up their concerns. You can examine how the silence functions without claiming to know every motive behind it.

What it does to your nervous system

Living with the possibility of another long silence can change how you approach difficult conversations. Some people become more watchful. Some feel anxious or on edge. Others react differently. When it happens repeatedly, those adjustments can build over time.

You may start monitoring. You notice which topics came before the silence, what was said, and when the withdrawal started. You begin wondering whether there is a safer time or a better way to raise something important. And sometimes, you start adjusting.

You may begin softening things before you say them. Picking your moment. Holding back a concern because you worry the next conversation will end in silence. The effort to avoid another withdrawal can start shaping what you say, even though you cannot control how someone else responds.

Repeated withdrawal may teach you to expect that certain conversations will end with no response. You might begin holding back questions or needs because you are trying to avoid another painful episode. That adjustment may feel protective, even though it does not give you control over whether the other person withdraws.

Over time, some people find that they share less of what matters because they expect another withdrawal. Others keep raising concerns despite the silence. Either response can tell you how the relationship is affecting your ability to communicate.

The difference between space and punishment

A lot of people in this situation get told — sometimes by the person doing it, sometimes by people on the outside — that the other person just needs time and space, and that wanting communication is clingy or demanding.

That framing is worth examining.

A constructive pause often includes some way to return to the discussion when it is safe and possible. But someone may be overwhelmed or unable to communicate clearly in the moment, and a lack of explanation alone does not prove punishment. What deserves attention is repeated withdrawal that leaves important concerns

unanswered or pressures you to apologize or give in. You may not know whether that effect was intended.

Wanting to know what is happening in your own relationship is not demanding. Wanting to be spoken to by your partner is not clingy. These are ordinary expectations, and the fact that they started to feel like too much is information about what the dynamic had become.

What you did to make it stop

Think about what you did during those periods of silence. Did you apologize, take responsibility, or agree to something mainly because you hoped it would restore contact? Did you begin trying to end the silence before you had a chance to decide what you actually believed about the disagreement?

You may have apologized for things you weren't sure you'd done. You may have walked back true things you'd said. You may have offered reassurances you didn't fully believe, agreed to things you hadn't agreed to before, made yourself available and accommodating in ways you wouldn't have if you hadn't been trying to get out from under the silence.

Sometimes the silence ended after you apologized, backed down, or offered reassurance. That could teach you to try the same things the next time, even when you hadn't done anything wrong. Other times, nothing you said seemed to make a difference. Either experience could leave you searching for a way to prevent it from happening again.

That is not a character flaw. Trying to restore a connection that matters to you can be an understandable response to an uncomfortable, uncertain situation. Other people respond differently. And the way you tried to end the silence does not, by itself, establish who was responsible for the disagreement.

The problem is what repeated apologies made only to end the silence can cost you. Your willingness to say what you really think. Your ability to disagree without fear of losing contact. Your confidence about what you are and are not responsible for. If you keep apologizing for things you don't believe you did, it can become harder to tell the

difference between a genuine repair and giving in just to make the silence stop.

When silence follows conflict

In a constructive disagreement, either person may need space, and they do not have to be equally upset. What helps is having a reasonable opportunity to return to the concern, listen, and seek an understanding when it is possible and safe. Not every disagreement ends in agreement, and an immediate conversation is not always possible.

Sometimes the silence ends, but the conversation that preceded it never comes back. The relationship seems to return to normal without addressing what happened. At other times, you may get part of a conversation but still feel that the central concern went unanswered.

When withdrawal repeatedly replaces discussion, the original disagreement may remain unresolved. You may begin expecting that certain concerns will lead to more silence, even though no one can know exactly what will happen in a future conversation. Over time, that expectation can influence whether and how you speak up.

A relationship can appear calm while important issues are not being discussed. For some people, avoiding conversations becomes easier than risking another period of withdrawal. That absence of open disagreement is not, by itself, evidence that the underlying problems have been resolved.

What it was doing to your ability to communicate

By the end of a repeated pattern like this, your communication may have been shaped around avoiding another withdrawal. You might have held back what you thought or needed, choosing words that seemed safer. That can make it harder to speak openly about things that matter to you.

That is a significant thing to carry. For some people, those habits continue after the relationship ends. The cautiousness, the monitoring, the anticipating-how-this-will-land before you've finished the thought — those patterns can follow you out. People who have lived inside a prolonged silence dynamic sometimes find themselves doing it with people who have never given them any reason to — hesitating before

they speak, bracing for a reaction that doesn't come, finding it hard to say a true and uncomfortable thing even when the person they're saying it to is completely safe.

These habits are not necessarily permanent. Some people become more comfortable speaking openly with time, safer circumstances, supportive relationships, or professional help. Others may need longer or experience ongoing difficulties. Ending the relationship does not automatically undo the effects, and there is no single timetable for change.

You were not too sensitive. You were responding to something real.

If someone told you during the silences that you were too needy, too clingy, too sensitive about being ignored — that assessment deserves to be revisited.

Wanting contact with your partner is not neediness. Feeling anxious when someone withdraws without explanation can be understandable, though people respond differently. That anxiety does not, by itself, prove the silence was intended as punishment. What matters is whether repeated withdrawal leaves your concerns unheard or pressures you to give in.

When silence repeatedly follows your concerns and leaves you feeling pressured to give in, that pattern is not just an ordinary pause in conversation. You can take the impact seriously without having to prove exactly what the other person intended. The question is whether your concerns could be addressed safely and respectfully over time.

Whatever part you may have played in the original disagreement, you were not responsible for another person's decision to shut you out. You still deserved a reasonable chance to address the concern without repeated exclusion or pressure.

The next chapter is about what happens when it isn't silence — when the response to saying no, or pushing back, or simply being present in a way that is inconvenient is something louder. When anger becomes the other tool.

Chapter 15 — Rage, Intimidation, and What Happens When You Say No

It wasn't even a big thing.

Say someone tells their partner they're too tired to go to the event tonight. That's it. That's the whole thing. They're tired, they don't want to go, they say so.

What comes back is not *okay, we can stay home.* What comes back is a shift in the room — a coldness, then a volume, then a full accounting of everything wrong with the decision and the person who made it. The conversation that follows is not about the event. It becomes about being selfish, inconsiderate, always doing this. And somewhere in the middle of it, the person who was just tired finds themselves apologizing, trying to fix something they can't name, wondering how they ended up here from something so small.

That is the pattern this chapter is about. Not the event. The aftermath. You may find yourself turning it over afterward, trying to work out what happened or whether anything you could have done differently would have prevented it. Other people respond differently. Whatever your reaction, the other person remains responsible for how they treated you.

What this looks like

A disproportionate reaction is exactly what it sounds like: a response whose size does not match the size of what caused it.

You said you didn't want to go somewhere, and they exploded. You asked a question about money, and the room changed completely. You disagreed with something small, and what followed was not a disagreement — it was an event. You expressed frustration about something, and ten minutes later you were apologizing, though you couldn't entirely explain what you were apologizing for.

The disproportionate part is important. People sometimes get angry, raise their voices, lose patience, or speak sharply. Those moments alone do not establish a pattern of intimidation. Here we are looking at

repeated responses to ordinary needs, disagreement, or boundaries, especially when those responses leave someone afraid to speak or say no. The pattern and its consequences matter more than the volume of any one argument.

For some people, the effect is becoming more careful. Quieter. Less willing to speak freely than they used to be. Others react differently, and that does not make the intimidation less serious.

Intimidation that doesn't have to be physical

When most people hear the word intimidation, they think of physical threat. And physical intimidation is real, serious, and covered directly in this chapter's Safety section.

But intimidation can operate without physical contact. Sometimes it is a voice loud enough that it changes the whole room, a hostile tone, a look, or a silence that makes you fear what comes next. Those things do not prove intimidation on their own. But when anger or threatening behavior repeatedly follows your attempts to speak, disagree, or set a boundary, pay attention to whether you are becoming afraid to exercise those choices.

It can operate through damage to things around you. An object thrown across the room. A possession deliberately broken. A door slammed during a confrontation in a way that makes you fear what will come next. You do not have to know whether the person intended to frighten you to take threatening behavior seriously. Not every hard-closing door means danger, but throwing or destroying objects during conflict can be a serious warning sign.

None of that requires physical contact to produce a physical response in you. Your body can respond to threatening behavior even when no one has touched you. Your heart may race. Your muscles may tighten. You may find yourself watching every movement, trying to work out what will happen next. When those experiences repeat, you can begin anticipating danger before anything has happened.

What you started doing instead of living

This part can take time to recognize, especially if you made adjustments gradually while living through repeated reactions.

You may have started tracking their mood before saying anything that mattered. Perhaps you asked yourself whether they were tired, upset, or likely to react sharply, and waited when it did not feel safe to speak. Not everyone develops this habit, but it can be an understandable response to repeated unpredictable reactions.

You may have become very careful about timing and wording. You might have led with something positive, circled around what you needed to say, or tried to offer a solution before the other person reacted. Not everyone responds by managing conversations this way. If you did, the effort you put into avoiding another confrontation deserves to be recognized.

You may have stopped raising certain subjects altogether. Maybe the concern was real and important, but earlier conversations had taught you that bringing it up could end badly. You might have kept a mental list of topics to avoid or changed your routine to reduce the chance of another confrontation. Other people keep speaking up despite the risk. Neither response makes you responsible for someone else's intimidation.

When someone repeatedly changes what they say or do because they are afraid of another person's reaction, that is different from ordinary accommodation. It may be a way of trying to stay safe. Look at whether you could express disagreement without intimidation, rather than judging yourself for how you adapted.

The apology you gave that you didn't owe

In some relationships, you start apologizing differently.

You may have begun apologizing for reasons other than believing you had done something wrong. Sometimes an apology can become a way to calm a frightening situation or end an argument before it escalates. That does not mean every apology you gave was insincere. It means that, in some moments, getting through the situation may have mattered more than settling who was responsible.

You may have apologized for being upset when being upset was completely reasonable. You may have apologized for a thing you said that was true. You may have apologized for asking a question that you

had every right to ask. And then, later, in the quiet after it was over, you sat with the particular discomfort of having apologized for something you weren't sorry for — and said nothing about it.

That discomfort is worth paying attention to. You may have said something was your fault mainly because you wanted the confrontation to stop. If that happened repeatedly, it could make responsibility harder to sort out afterward, though people respond differently. An apology offered under pressure is not, by itself, proof that you caused the original harm.

The difference between conflict and control

Conflict is a normal part of relationships. Two people who are both real people with their own needs and perspectives will sometimes disagree. Sometimes those disagreements will be uncomfortable. Sometimes people will raise their voices. Sometimes things will be said that need to be revisited. That is not what this chapter is describing.

This chapter describes a pattern in which anger or intimidation repeatedly follows your saying no, expressing a need, disagreeing, or setting a limit. You cannot know every private motive behind a reaction. But if those reactions make it harder or less safe for you to exercise ordinary choices, the controlling effect deserves attention.

Over time, you may begin weighing the possible reaction before asserting yourself. Is this worth bringing up? Is now safe? For some people, that calculation leads to silence or fewer requests. Others keep resisting or seek support. The difference in responses does not determine whether the intimidating behavior was acceptable.

That is no longer an ordinary disagreement between two people. It is a pattern in which one person's intimidating reactions begin shaping what the other person feels safe enough to say or do.

Safety

This section needs to be direct, because some people reading this chapter are describing a situation where the anger is not only frightening but physically dangerous.

Physical intimidation does not require someone to strike you. It includes being blocked from leaving a room, being cornered, being physically loomed over or positioned so that you cannot easily move away, having objects thrown or destroyed near you, and being threatened with what might happen. These behaviors can produce fear whether or not any contact occurs. If any of that is familiar, please take it seriously.

If you are in a situation where you are afraid of what will happen if you disagree, if you try to leave, if you try to end the relationship — that fear is relevant information. It doesn't mean harm is inevitable, but it does mean the situation deserves careful attention.

If you are in immediate danger in the United States, call 911 or your local emergency number when it is safe to do so. For confidential support exploring your options, the U.S. National Domestic Violence Hotline is 1-800-799-7233. You do not have to decide to leave before contacting an advocate, and an advocate can help you consider a safety plan for your circumstances. If someone may monitor your phone, browser, accounts, or bills, contacting a hotline could leave traces on that device or account. When possible, use a device or connection the other person cannot access. Private or incognito browsing does not make a monitored device safe. If you are outside the United States, contact a local domestic violence support service or emergency number.

If physical safety is not an immediate concern but the pattern in this chapter is familiar, that also deserves attention. A relationship where you are afraid to express a need, where you manage your behavior around another person's potential reactions, where you have stopped saying things you need to say — that is a relationship that is costing you something significant, and you are allowed to take that seriously too.

What you stopped saying

There is a particular kind of grief that comes with this, and it deserves to be named.

For some people, it is grief for themselves. For the things they did not say, the opinions they held back, or the objections they swallowed

because speaking up felt too costly. Other people may remember resisting or speaking out. Those experiences can be painful too.

You had a voice before this. You may have learned to cover it over so completely that using it again feels unfamiliar. Finding that voice can take time, and it doesn't happen automatically just because the relationship ends. But it is possible. It happens for people. And it can begin with understanding what you stopped saying, what made speaking feel unsafe, and what you need now.

If you stopped speaking up because you were afraid of what would happen, that does not mean you had nothing to say. It means the conditions around speaking had changed. That distinction is worth recognizing without blaming yourself for the choices you made to get through it.

The next chapter is about DARVO: deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender. It is a pattern that can turn a confrontation about alleged harm into an attack on the person raising it. We will look at how that reversal works, and why recognizing the pattern still requires examining what actually happened.

Chapter 16 — DARVO: How You End Up Apologizing for Things They Did

You went into the conversation because you needed to say something. Something that had been building. Something that needed to be addressed — a specific thing they did, a specific way you'd been treated, something you could no longer not say.

You had thought about it beforehand. You had tried to find the right words. You had decided you weren't going to get emotional, you were going to stay calm, you were going to say clearly what happened and what you needed to change.

And then, somehow — fifteen minutes in, or twenty, or less — you were the one being defensive. You were the one trying to explain yourself. You were the one who had somehow become the subject of the conversation. And they were the one who had been wronged.

You are still not entirely sure how it happened.

What DARVO is

DARVO is a term coined by researcher Jennifer Freyd to describe a pattern that can appear when someone is confronted about an allegation of harmful behavior. It stands for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender.

DARVO names three linked moves that can appear together or overlap in a confrontation. They do not always happen in a fixed order, and a disagreement or defensive response alone does not establish the full pattern.

Deny: The behavior is denied, minimized, or reframed. *I didn't do that. That's not what happened. You're misremembering. You're taking it out of context.*

Attack: The person who raised the concern is now under attack. Their character, their motives, their method of raising it, their history, their credibility — something becomes the subject of criticism. *Why are you*

doing this right now? You always do this. You love to make me the bad guy. This is about control.

Reverse Victim and Offender: The person being confronted describes themselves as the one who has been wronged and casts the person raising the concern as the offender. In cases where wrongdoing is established, this reversal can deflect attention from that harm. But the reversal itself does not prove the original allegation, and someone expressing genuine distress is not, by itself, evidence of DARVO.

The moves can occur within one conversation, sometimes quickly. You may only recognize the shift afterward, when you realize a discussion that began with a specific concern ended with you defending your character or apologizing instead of addressing what happened.

The play-by-play

Here is an illustrative conversation, not a transcript, showing what the pattern can sound like.

You say: *When you said that in front of everyone at dinner, it embarrassed me. I need that not to happen again.*

Deny: *I didn't say anything wrong. You're too sensitive. Everyone else thought it was funny.*

You try to stay on track. You say: *I'm telling you how it felt to me. I'd like you to take that seriously.*

Attack: *Here we go. You always find something to be upset about. You're doing this because you want to control how I act in front of my friends. You're trying to make me feel like a bad person.*

You are now defending the legitimacy of your original concern, explaining that you are not trying to control them, trying to demonstrate that your feelings were reasonable. You are on defense.

Reverse: *Do you know how it feels to always be the bad guy? To have everything I do picked apart? I'm trying my best and nothing is ever enough for you. This is exhausting.*

They may be visibly upset now. They may be crying, or shut down, or walking away. The conversation is now about their pain.

And you — the person who came into the room with a specific, legitimate thing to address — are now wondering whether you caused this. Whether you said it wrong. Whether you should apologize.

Why it works

DARVO can shift attention away from the original concern. Research links exposure to DARVO with self-blame in studied contexts and shows effects on observers' judgments. But not everyone responds in the same way.

You may care that the other person is upset and still want your original concern addressed. Some people soften their approach when they see distress. Others stay focused, become angry, or disengage. Concern for someone's feelings does not require abandoning the question you raised.

Many people are willing to consider that they may have misunderstood part of an event. That willingness can be healthy. In a repeated pattern of denial, personal attack, and role reversal, however, the conversation may stop examining the facts and start questioning the credibility of the person who raised the concern. Some people begin doubting themselves; others recognize the deflection without accepting it.

By the time the role reversal appears, you may be defending yourself, trying to stay fair, or unsure how the original concern became an accusation against you. You may also recognize the shift and refuse it. The important point is that the original question has not necessarily been answered.

What you walked away with

People describe different responses after conversations that involve denial, personal attacks, and role reversal. Confusion, guilt, anger, or a clearer sense of what happened are all possible; no single reaction is required for the pattern to be concerning.

Some people feel confused afterward and question whether their original concern was reasonable. Others remain certain about what happened. A conversation that ends in role reversal does not automatically erase the clarity someone brought into it.

Another possible reaction is guilt. Seeing someone distressed after you raised a concern may leave you questioning whether you were wrong to bring it up. Research has linked DARVO exposure with self-blame in studied contexts, but guilt is not inevitable.

Repeated conversations like this can affect what someone chooses to raise next time. Some begin avoiding difficult subjects because earlier attempts were painful or unproductive. Others continue speaking up, set limits, seek support, or leave the conversation. Those differences do not decide whether the original concern was valid.

Over time, repeated redirection may influence trust, willingness to speak, and how safe someone feels raising concerns. The effects vary. What is worth examining is whether the original issues are repeatedly left unresolved and what that pattern has meant in your life.

Recognizing it after the fact

Sometimes DARVO is easier to recognize afterward than while you are in the conversation.

During a difficult conversation, you may be focused on responding to the denial, the criticism, or the other person's distress. That can make the pattern hard to notice in real time. Some people recognize it as it happens. Others see it only later, and neither response proves or disproves what was originally alleged.

But afterward — an hour later, or a day later, or years later — you may be able to see the shape of it. The conversation that started about a concern you raised and ended about your behavior. The accusation that arrived when you asked for that concern to be addressed. The way you left without an answer to the original question, and found yourself, somehow, in the position of having been unkind.

If that shape looks familiar across more than one conversation, it is worth paying attention to. You may be recognizing a repeated pattern in how your concerns were handled, even if you cannot reconstruct every word or detail of every exchange.

The original concern still matters

This is what gets lost in a DARVO sequence, and it's worth saying plainly.

The original concern does not disappear because the conversation went sideways.

Whatever you went into that conversation to address still deserves an honest response. Shifting the discussion to your tone, motives, or character does not, by itself, resolve the concern you raised.

This is one of the ways patterns persist. When the conversation repeatedly shifts away from the original concern, that concern may never receive a meaningful response. Without accountability or resolution, the same problem can continue. And after enough conversations like that, you may begin to question whether raising it again is worth the cost.

You are allowed to hold on to what you originally went in to say, even when the conversation that followed made you doubt whether you had the right to say it. Those are two different things. The sequence that followed was a response. It was not a verdict.

The next chapter is about how other people get brought into this — how triangulation works, what flying monkeys are, and what it costs to watch people you trusted take a version of events that was never the full story.

Chapter 17 — Triangulation and Flying Monkeys: When Other People Become Part of It

Sometimes you discover that you were not dealing with just one person's version of events.

You thought the problems in your relationship were staying between the two of you. Then you began finding out what other people had been told, what they believed, and how those stories were changing the way they treated you.

Some people become involved through comparisons with an ex or someone new. Others deliver messages, check on you, or pass along information. Some may have no idea what they are being drawn into; others may knowingly take part in pressure or harassment. You cannot tell what each person knew or intended just from their involvement.

What triangulation is

In family-systems theory, triangulation describes a three-person dynamic in which tension between two people draws in a third. That does not automatically mean anyone intended harm. In a controlling relationship, third-party involvement may also be used to apply pressure, create insecurity, or interfere with direct communication.

Bringing another person into a conversation is not automatically triangulation. People need support, and talking to someone you trust about a difficult relationship is normal. The distinction is how the third person becomes involved. Are they helping someone work through a problem, or are they being used to create jealousy, apply pressure, monitor you, or turn other people against you?

Triangulation is not unique to narcissistic traits. Third-party involvement can occur in many relationships and family systems. Here, we are looking at specific harmful patterns, without assuming that personality traits explain every three-person interaction.

One harmful pattern is being repeatedly compared with someone else until you begin questioning your place in the relationship. An ex may be mentioned often, kept unusually present, or brought up during disagreements. Someone new may seem to appear whenever you raise a concern. The comparisons can leave you feeling insecure, but their timing alone does not prove a deliberate plan to make you jealous. Look at the repeated behavior and whether your concerns are addressed.

The second form is a pattern in which information about disagreements or conflicts gets shared with other people in a way that shapes how they see you. Sometimes that is ordinary support-seeking. But when the accounts repeatedly focus on your supposed failings and other people begin treating you differently, the consequences go beyond the original disagreement. You may not know what was shared or whether changing others' views was the intention.

A third pattern involves people carrying messages, seeking information about you, or contacting you after you have limited direct contact. Some may be acting independently or believe they are helping; others knowingly assist pressure or monitoring. Repeated unwanted contact, surveillance, threats, or attempts to bypass protective boundaries are safety concerns regardless of what a messenger understands.

What flying monkeys are

The phrase flying monkeys comes from *The Wizard of Oz* and is used informally in discussions of abusive relationships. It is not a clinical diagnosis or a research-validated category. Here it refers to third parties who relay messages, support pressure, or participate in harmful contact on someone else's behalf.

Someone contacting you on another person's behalf may believe they are helping, may have heard only one account, or may know more than they disclose. You cannot tell exactly what they were told or what they intended merely from their involvement. You can evaluate their actions and whether they respect your boundaries.

Some flying monkeys do become aware, over time, that the version they were given was incomplete or inaccurate. Some choose to do something with that awareness. Some don't.

Other people may knowingly spread misleading information, pressure you, or pass along details you asked them not to share. Their motives can differ. You do not need to establish why they participated before deciding whether their behavior was harmful or continued contact is safe.

The effects vary. You may encounter people repeating accounts you dispute, delivering unwanted messages, or sharing information without your consent. Those actions can be harmful even when you cannot establish whether a coordinated plan existed or what each person believed.

What it feels like to be on the receiving end

There is a particular quality to being triangulated. It feels like the ground is unsteady — like the relationship you thought you were in has more dimensions than you knew, and you can't quite find the edges of it.

You learn that conversations you thought were private were repeated. People you trusted may have heard an account of a disagreement that you believe leaves important details out. Someone calls to check in, but the questions feel intrusive. You can decide what to share without assuming you know whether the caller plans to repeat your answers.

The ex shows up in conversation again, casually, at a moment when you have recently expressed a concern about the relationship. The comparison is offhand, almost accidental. But you feel the shape of it.

You try to correct what someone has heard. They listen, but later you learn that part of your conversation reached the other person. You may not know whether the information was deliberately collected or shared for another reason. What you do know is that the exchange was not as private as you believed.

The isolation that comes with this

There can be a particular kind of isolation here. You may be surrounded by familiar faces and still feel unsure who has heard what about you or whether a private conversation will stay private. That is a possible effect of third-party pressure, not something everyone experiences.

You may be at a dinner table, an event, or in a group chat wondering who has heard what about you. That uncertainty can make it hard to speak freely. You may worry you will sound petty or be dismissed if you explain. Those fears do not establish what everyone else knows or believes.

A mutual friend says something that sounds like it might be a message from someone else. You wonder whether they have heard a different version of events. Sometimes that connection can be confirmed; sometimes it remains uncertain. Separate what they actually said from what you suspect was behind it.

That is exhausting in a way that is hard to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it. Because from the outside, nothing looks wrong. You are surrounded by people. You are in conversation. And you are completely alone in what you know.

When you lost people

Some of you will have lost people to this.

Some relationships become strained after others hear accounts about you that you dispute or believe are incomplete. You may remain in the same social circles while sensing that people see you differently. You cannot always know precisely what someone believed or why the relationship changed.

For some people, that brings a particular kind of grief. Not simply the grief of growing apart, but the feeling that someone came to see you through an account you could not fully correct. Like standing on one side of a wall made of someone else's words.

Some of those relationships do improve. A person may hear more of the story, reconsider what they believed, or decide to speak with you directly. Others may never return to the relationship you had. You cannot always know what changed their mind, or why they stayed away.

You do not have to spend years performing innocence for everyone who heard another version of your story. You can choose what needs correcting, especially when your safety, children, work, housing, or legal circumstances are affected. Some relationships may be worth

repairing. Others may need boundaries. Being misunderstood does not prove the relationship was never real.

What it means for how you trust people now

This is worth looking at directly, because it has a long reach.

When private conversations were shared, or information reached people you had not chosen to tell, you may become more guarded. You may think harder about what you share and with whom. That caution can make sense, but it is not an inevitable or permanent effect. Your response may depend on what happened, the support you have, and what you experience afterward.

Being careful about what you shared may have helped you manage uncertainty or unwanted contact. That caution does not necessarily persist in new settings. If it does, you may notice yourself holding back even when there is no evidence the current conversation is being reported elsewhere.

You can approach that caution without criticizing yourself. Look at what is happening now, decide what feels appropriate to share, and notice which people respect your boundaries. You do not have to force trust or treat every careful decision as a problem to overcome.

The next chapter looks at what can happen when someone tells other people their version of events before you have had a chance to share yours. We will examine smear campaigns, the damage they can cause, and the difficulty of responding when others have already heard allegations about you.

Chapter 18 — Smear Campaigns: When They Get to the Story First

You found out from someone else.

That is one way you may find out. You didn't hear it directly — you heard it sideways. A friend who seemed strange on the phone. A message that felt more careful than it should have. Someone who had always been easy to reach who suddenly wasn't. And then, eventually, the information surfaced: a story was going around. And in that story, you were the one who had done something wrong.

The account may be false, misleading, incomplete, or made up of accurate details presented without important context. You may not yet know exactly what was said, who heard it, or what anyone believed. But learning that an account is circulating can leave you wondering how far it has traveled.

You were behind before you knew there was a race.

What a smear campaign is

People use the phrase smear campaign to describe repeated efforts to damage someone's reputation through false, misleading, or unfairly selective claims. It is a descriptive term here, not a clinical diagnosis. A coordinated plan is possible, but should not be presumed simply because several people have heard a damaging story.

In the relationships discussed in this book, damaging accounts may circulate during a breakup, after someone raises concerns, or after separation. That timing may be relevant, but it does not by itself tell you why the person shared the account or whether the information is deliberately false.

When damaging stories begin circulating during a breakup or after someone raises concerns, the timing can matter. An account that reaches other people first may shape how they interpret everything that follows, regardless of whether you can establish why it was shared at that moment.

An early account can influence how someone interprets later information, especially when it comes from a trusted person. That does not make it impossible to correct. Research on misinformation shows that corrections can improve accuracy, although an earlier impression may sometimes linger. Those findings do not tell us what any particular friend or family member will believe.

What they tell people

The content of a smear campaign varies, but there are patterns.

One kind of damaging account questions your emotional stability: you are described as volatile, unstable, or unable to handle disagreement. A genuine moment of distress may be retold without the circumstances around it. But hearing that accusation does not automatically tell you whether the speaker is knowingly distorting events.

Another account questions your honesty: you lied, manipulated, or concealed information. Claims can involve real disagreements, selective details, mistakes, or fabricated allegations. Sometimes a person may attribute their own conduct to you. The exact facts have to be evaluated; the accusation alone cannot establish which explanation is correct.

Another kind of account concerns your treatment of them. You were abusive. You were controlling. You were cruel. These are serious allegations, and the people hearing them may not know what happened. Some accounts may be false or misleading; others may describe actual harm. The right response is to take safety and available evidence seriously, without deciding that a claim must be true or false simply because of who spoke first.

An accusation about your stability, honesty, or conduct can affect how other people receive your account. Someone who believes it may question your explanation, while another person may ask for evidence or remain uncertain. Repeated, misleading allegations can damage your reputation, but you cannot assume in advance that every listener will dismiss you.

What it costs

The costs are specific, and they accumulate.

You may lose contact with some people. A friend may become distant or a relative may stop calling after hearing damaging allegations. It can be painful, especially when you have known them for years. Sometimes the connection to the story is clear; sometimes you do not know exactly what they heard or why the relationship changed.

You may also notice changes in shared spaces, friendships, or professional relationships. You might be excluded from an event or miss an opportunity, without knowing whether a story about you played any role. When a link can be documented, take it seriously; when it cannot, keep the difference between the event and your explanation of it clear.

Not knowing who has heard what can carry its own burden. You may find yourself wondering whether a conversation will be private or whether someone has formed an opinion before speaking with you. That uncertainty can be exhausting, even though it does not establish what any particular person heard or believed.

And you may spend energy on it. Trying to understand what was said, who heard it, whether to respond, and how to respond safely can take time and attention. Some of that work may be necessary to protect your life or your children; some of it may leave you exhausted without changing what people believe.

Why correcting it directly can be complicated

Your first instinct is probably to correct it. To reach out to the people who heard the story and explain what actually happened. To provide your version. To offer evidence if you have it.

That instinct makes sense. A correction may help, but it may not reach everyone or produce the response you hope for.

If someone has heard an allegation about your honesty or emotional stability, they may interpret your reply through that earlier account. But other listeners may reconsider after hearing a clear explanation or seeing evidence. The earlier allegation can complicate a correction; it does not mean correcting the record is pointless.

Someone who hears competing accounts may not want to become involved. They may feel unsure about the facts, worry about

relationships on both sides, or simply not know how to respond. You cannot tell from silence alone which of those reasons, if any, explains their choice.

Part of the difficulty is that correcting a claim can take more work than making it. A claim can be made in a sentence. Responding accurately may take longer, require context, and ask people to consider details they had not heard before.

None of this means you shouldn't tell your truth, or that you should never respond to what is being said about you.

Not every false accusation should be handled the same way. You do not have to answer every rumor. But when an allegation affects your job, your children, your safety, your housing, or a legal matter, taking steps to document the claim, correct the record, or obtain qualified advice may be necessary. Choosing when and how to respond is different from spending your life trying to convince everyone.

In lower-stakes social situations, you can decide whether a direct correction, a brief conversation, or simply continuing to live according to your values makes sense. None guarantees that someone will change their view. The choice should reflect your circumstances and the cost of engaging.

What can help, and what may not change

Living consistently with your values can help people recognize who you are over time. Some people may question what they were told. Some relationships may recover. Others may not. Your integrity matters, but it cannot guarantee that a false story will disappear or that everyone who heard it will reconsider.

Some people who know you well may question a damaging account, ask you directly, or decide they do not have enough information. Others may accept what they heard or withdraw. Long familiarity can matter, but it does not guarantee how anyone will respond.

When someone withdraws after hearing a damaging account of you, you may never know exactly what they believed or why they chose not to ask you about it. The loss can still hurt, even when you understand that you cannot make someone reopen the conversation.

Some damaging accounts fade as people move on or stop repeating them. Others continue circulating, resurface later, or have effects that last even after the original claim is challenged. There is no dependable timetable for when a rumor will weaken or disappear.

What you can build is a record of how you actually live and treat people. That may matter to people willing to get to know you or reconsider an allegation. It may not erase every false claim. You can value your integrity without making your future depend on whether everyone eventually recognizes it.

What you are not responsible for

You are not responsible for managing a story you did not create. You are not responsible for personally correcting every person who received a false account of you. You are not responsible for proving your character to people who have already decided.

You can take responsibility for your own conduct without taking responsibility for another person's claims. You may still need to protect yourself or your children, preserve evidence, correct significant inaccuracies, or seek legal or professional guidance when the stakes are serious. You can weigh what is safe and worthwhile while meeting any responsibilities that apply to your situation.

Some relationships may not recover, and grieving that loss is understandable. Others may change again with time or conversation. You do not have to spend your life pursuing every person who pulled away, and you do not have to assume you know exactly why each relationship changed. You can acknowledge the loss while making decisions about where to invest your energy next.

The next chapter moves into the financial dimension of these patterns — how money becomes a tool, what financial control looks like in practice, and the specific ways it can be used to create dependence and limit options.

Chapter 19 — Financial Control and Coercive Control

Sometimes it does not start with money. The restrictions may begin with other everyday decisions before financial access becomes part of the pattern.

In one version of this pattern, it starts with time. With access. With which decisions are yours to make and which ones get questioned until deferring feels easier. A purchase you feel you have to explain. A plan you feel you have to justify. When financial restrictions follow those earlier interactions, you may already be used to checking, asking, or defending choices that should have been yours to make.

Sometimes what appears to be a disagreement about money is part of a larger pattern of restrictions. Money may be where that pattern becomes easiest to see.

What coercive control is

Coercive control refers to a pattern of behavior that restricts another person's freedom, autonomy, or ability to make independent decisions. It can involve financial restrictions, monitoring, threats, isolation, or other pressures. The pattern may build gradually, but not every situation develops in the same order, and physical violence is not required for the behavior to be serious.

Sociologist Evan Stark helped develop the framework of coercive control to describe how abuse can involve a continuing pattern of restrictions on autonomy, not only isolated episodes of physical violence. The framework drew attention to harms that may be missed when people look only for a single dramatic incident. Whether particular conduct meets a legal definition or can be proved depends on the law and the evidence.

Money can be one tool of coercive control. It is not the only one — isolation, monitoring, restricting movement, and controlling information may also be part of an abusive pattern. Financial restrictions can have a particularly practical effect: they may limit what

someone can pay for, where they can go, and which choices are realistically available.

How financial control develops

Financial restrictions do not always begin with an obvious demand. Sometimes they emerge through arrangements that initially seem practical, caring, or like a reasonable division of responsibilities. In other cases, the restrictions are clear from the beginning.

One person handling the bills is not automatically financial control. Some couples divide responsibilities that way and both people remain informed, able to access their money, and free to question decisions. The problem begins when one person's access, information, or choices are restricted, and attempts to regain independence are met with pressure, punishment, or obstruction.

The shift can be gradual. One person may handle the finances because they know more about them, earn more, or simply took on that task when the couple moved in together. That arrangement becomes concerning when the other person loses access to information, accounts, or meaningful participation in financial decisions, especially when efforts to regain access are blocked.

Sometimes spending starts to be questioned, especially spending on friends, family, or personal needs. Questions about a shared budget are not automatically abusive. The concern is a repeated pattern in which one person must justify ordinary spending to avoid threats, punishment, or other harmful reactions, while the other retains freedom over their own choices.

In some relationships, money earned by one or both partners goes into shared accounts, but access and decision-making are unequal. One person may spend freely while the other has to ask, is given an allowance, or stops making ordinary purchases to avoid pressure or punishment. What matters is the restriction on choice, not simply whether the couple shares money.

In some cases, debt is created or increased in one person's name without informed agreement, or someone is pressured to take on credit they do not want. Credit can be damaged, and sorting out responsibility

may be complicated. Whether a particular debt is legally enforceable depends on the circumstances and applicable law.

The practical effect of financial dependency

Financial dependency is not a character weakness. It is a condition that develops under specific circumstances, and its effect is practical and concrete.

When you cannot access money — your own earnings, accounts, or credit — leaving may become much harder and less safe. You may struggle to pay a rental deposit, travel, replace documents, arrange childcare, or get legal advice. Those are real barriers, even though outside support or other options may sometimes be available.

Limiting someone's options can be one of the practical effects of financial control. A person who cannot easily pay for housing, transportation, or legal help may face serious barriers to leaving. That does not mean leaving is impossible or that every person responds the same way. The restriction itself matters, whatever explanation is given for it.

Financial restrictions can become harder to escape as dependence grows. Less access to savings, credit, or employment may raise the practical cost of changing the relationship. That pattern can reinforce itself, though the course of each relationship varies and you cannot determine the other person's private intentions from the financial arrangement alone.

Isolation and the removal of support

Financial control can occur alongside other forms of coercive control, including restrictions on contact with friends and family. These patterns may reinforce each other, but they do not always appear together.

This can look like conflict with your friends and family that is never resolved. The relationship between you and the people close to you becomes difficult, strained, managed. Plans with them get complicated. Conversations after you see them go badly. Eventually, you see them less — not because they've been explicitly forbidden, but because seeing them costs too much in the relationship.

It can look like a move that takes you away from the people who know you. A new city, a different community, an environment where your connections are fewer and newer and don't have the depth that would allow them to see clearly what is happening.

It can look like repeated challenges to your judgment. When your decisions are continually questioned or your instincts dismissed, you may start doubting yourself. That loss of confidence can make it harder to reach for support or make a plan, although not everyone responds in the same way. The repeated undermining is the behavior to examine, not a personal failure on your part.

Over time, restrictions on support can make your world feel smaller. You may notice fewer visits, fewer conversations, or choices that seem too difficult to make. Sometimes the change is obvious. Sometimes it happens gradually enough that it is harder to name.

What was taken from you

Financial control can take specific things from a person, and those losses are worth naming.

It can cost time. If your access to earnings, savings, or credit was restricted for months or years, rebuilding financial independence may require work after the relationship ends. Some consequences last; others can be addressed sooner, depending on what happened.

It can limit options. The decisions you could not make because you did not have access to resources. The opportunities you could not take. The plans you could not carry out. Some of those losses may be recoverable; others may not be, depending on what happened.

It can take a toll on confidence. When your financial judgment is consistently questioned, when you are repeatedly told you can't manage money or don't understand how things work, those messages may start to sink in. You might begin doubting decisions you are capable of making. Not everyone responds that way, but the repeated undermining matters whether or not it changes how you see yourself.

And it may have taken your credit, your savings, your professional trajectory, or other concrete resources that have practical consequences you are still managing now.

None of that is your fault. Financial dependence can develop for many reasons, including circumstances neither person chose — a period of unemployment, caregiving, illness, or other life changes. What makes it controlling is when someone uses that dependence to restrict your choices, deny access to resources, or make independence harder. Whether the dependency was created deliberately or exploited after it developed, the harm and practical obstacles deserve to be taken seriously.

Getting out when money is the obstacle

For some people reading this chapter, the financial constraint is not past tense. They are in the middle of it, and the obstacle to leaving is specifically financial.

If that is where you are, support may be available. Domestic violence organizations can offer safety planning, advocacy, and referrals; the services and financial or housing assistance available vary by location and provider. Physical violence does not have to be part of your experience to ask about coercive or financial abuse. In the United States, you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or text START to 88788 for help exploring local options. The Hotline does not provide cash or housing vouchers directly.

If someone is monitoring your accounts, phone, messages, or movements, trying to open an account or contact someone for help could alert them before you have a safe plan. You do not have to make those changes all at once. A domestic violence advocate can help you consider your circumstances and identify safer options before taking steps that could be noticed.

If you have a friend or family member you believe is safe and able to help, you might choose to share some of what has been happening when and how it is safe for you. People close to you may not know the full picture, but you cannot assume how they will respond. An advocate can help you think through which contacts, if any, are safest.

If your credit has been damaged or your financial history is complicated, there may be steps to assess and improve your position. Some debts may be disputed, particularly when fraud or coercion is involved, but the options depend on the facts and the law. A domestic violence advocate, legal aid program, or reputable nonprofit credit counselor may help you explore the next steps. Be wary of anyone promising to erase accurate debt or repair credit quickly. Rebuilding starts with your circumstances, not a guarantee.

The next chapter is about a cycle some people recognize — the tension, the incident, the period of calm or renewed affection, and the confusion of living through those changes. Not every abusive relationship follows that sequence, and it is never the only reason someone may stay.

Chapter 20 — The Cycle: Tension, Explosion, Honeymoon, Repeat

You knew something was coming before it arrived.

You couldn't have said exactly what or when, but you felt it — a quality in the atmosphere, a tightening in yourself, a low-level monitoring that you'd gotten good at without meaning to. Things were quieter than they should have been, or comments were sharper, or there was a small thing that happened and you filed it away: *this is building toward something.*

And then it came. And then it passed. And then, sometimes almost immediately, things were better than they'd been in a long time. The person who had just been frightening or cruel was now attentive, affectionate, apologetic, the person you fell in love with. And you felt — you actually felt — that maybe this time something had genuinely changed.

That is one pattern sometimes called the cycle of abuse. Naming it may help you recognize what happened, but recognition alone does not necessarily change your circumstances or how you feel about the relationship.

The four phases

Psychologist Lenore Walker described a three-stage cycle of violence in 1979, based on interviews with women who had experienced battering. A later, commonly taught adaptation separates it into four phases: tension building, incident, reconciliation, and calm. The model can help some people describe experiences they recognize. But its original evidence was not representative of every survivor, and many abusive relationships do not follow these stages or repeat them in a predictable order.

Tension building. In some relationships, a person notices growing tension before a harmful incident. Comments may become sharper, or daily interactions may feel increasingly difficult. Someone might begin choosing words carefully or trying to keep the peace. In other

relationships there is no identifiable warning period, and the person harmed cannot predict when an incident will happen.

Incident. In this version of the pattern, a harmful episode occurs. It might involve threats, intimidation, physical violence, sexual coercion, humiliation, or another form of abusive control. It does not have to be an explosion or a single dramatic event. Ordinary disagreement is not automatically abuse; the conduct, context, and pattern of control matter. Some people immediately recognize what happened as abuse. Others are left questioning it.

Reconciliation. This phase is sometimes called the honeymoon phase, and that is an accurate name for how it can feel. The person who caused the incident may apologize — sometimes minimally, sometimes extravagantly. They may be affectionate, attentive, helpful in ways they haven't been. They may cry. They may make promises. The relationship may feel, in this phase, closer and more connected than it has in a long time.

Calm. Some people experience a quieter period after an incident, when daily life seems to return to normal. The quiet may feel reassuring, or it may feel tense and uncertain. Some relationships have little or no calm period, and a return to routine does not establish that the harmful behavior has been addressed or will not happen again.

Why reconciliation can affect hope and decisions

If a period of warmth or apology follows harm, it can be especially confusing. Someone looking only at the harmful incident may not understand why you also remember closeness and good days. But reconciliation is not part of every abusive relationship, and it is not the only reason a person might stay. Safety, threats, children, housing, money, and available support may matter just as much or more.

The affection or sense of connection you felt during a good period was an experience you had. You do not have to dismiss that feeling as imaginary. A calmer stretch may bring back hopes for the relationship and the future you wanted. What those moments meant to the other person, or whether they signaled lasting change, cannot be determined from the warmth alone.

For some people, reconciliation brings renewed hope. The other person may acknowledge the harm, apologize, or promise to change. That can feel deeply meaningful, especially after a frightening or exhausting period. You may feel close again and want to believe the relationship can improve. What matters over time is whether the harmful conduct actually changes, not simply how convincing an apology feels.

And the painful truth is that this dynamic — hope, intimacy, belief in change — is not irrational. People do change. Relationships do recover from serious problems. The experience of believing it could be different is not stupidity or weakness. It is a reasonable response to what the reconciliation phase looks and feels like.

When affection or apologies repeatedly follow harmful behavior, hope may return even after earlier promises failed. That can make the pattern difficult to evaluate while living through it. But the emotional effect is not identical for everyone, and some people experience no reconciliation at all. The repeated harmful behavior still matters, whether or not another period of warmth follows.

Why the pattern can change or intensify over time

In some abusive relationships, the pattern changes over time. The periods of reconciliation may become shorter, incidents may happen more frequently, or the behavior may become more dangerous. In others, the pattern is less predictable. There is no fixed timetable or sequence that every abusive relationship follows.

For someone whose situation is worsening, the changes may include shorter periods of calm, fewer apologies, or more frequent or dangerous incidents. For others, harmful behavior may remain chronic or fluctuate without an orderly progression. A survivor’s words or ordinary actions do not cause another person to choose abusive behavior, and the pattern itself cannot be used to predict precisely when danger will increase.

Changes in abusive behavior may be gradual, abrupt, or difficult to predict. Some people recognize escalating danger as it happens; others see a pattern more clearly later. The absence of gradual warning signs does not make an experience less serious.

Why understanding it doesn't automatically break it

You may have known about this cycle before you read this chapter. You may have identified it while you were still in the relationship. You may have named the phases, recognized the pattern, known intellectually what was happening — and still found yourself in the reconciliation phase believing, again, that this time was different.

That does not mean you lacked intelligence or judgment. Recognizing a harmful pattern does not remove the practical or emotional factors involved. Hope, attachment, fear, finances, safety concerns, children, and past experiences can all affect what choices seem possible. No single nervous-system explanation accounts for everyone's response.

Knowing a pattern and being able to change your situation are different things. Recognition can be useful, but it is not a prerequisite for seeking safety or making a decision. Depending on the circumstances, leaving or setting boundaries may involve risks, housing, money, legal concerns, childcare, and support. A domestic violence advocate can help you consider options without requiring you to leave on a particular timetable.

What it means that the good periods were real

This is worth saying, because people who leave sometimes struggle with it.

The good periods were real experiences for you. The affection you received, the hope you felt, the moments when you were happy together — those moments are part of your history. You do not have to decide whether every promise was sincere or every affectionate moment was genuine to acknowledge what those experiences meant to you.

Those experiences do not cancel out the harm. A relationship can include moments you valued deeply and still involve control, fear, or serious injury. For some people, remembering the good periods complicates decisions about leaving or brings grief afterward. Others experience that part differently. None of those responses changes the importance of the harmful behavior.

Good periods do not make the full relationship safe or acceptable. Warmth and connection can coexist with repeated harm, and you do not have to settle whether the other person truly loved you to evaluate their behavior. The risk may increase over time, or it may be unpredictable. What matters is your safety, your options, and what the relationship has actually been like.

Both things can be true. You can grieve what was real without having to pretend the rest wasn't happening. You can love someone and also know that staying is not something you can keep doing. Those are not contradictions that need to be resolved before you can act.

The next chapter looks further back, at what you learned about love before this relationship began. How early experiences can shape what feels familiar, what you expect from other people, and what you believe you have to do to be loved. Understanding those influences is not about blaming you for what happened. It is about recognizing where some of those expectations began.

PART THREE: THE ROOTS — WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Chapter 21 — What You Were Taught About Love

Before this relationship, there was something else.

Before an adult relationship, you may already have learned something about closeness from childhood. The people who cared for you, the home you grew up in, and how others responded when you needed help can influence what feels familiar later. Those early experiences matter, but they are not the only influences on what you expect from love, and they do not determine your adult relationships.

This chapter is not about blame. It is not about deciding that your childhood caused this, or that your parents made you vulnerable, or that everything that happened to you in this relationship is traceable to something that happened before. Life does not work that neatly, and adults make their own choices regardless of history.

This chapter looks at why certain behaviors can feel familiar, even when they later prove harmful. You may recognize similarities to things you experienced growing up, or you may not. Familiarity can help explain part of your experience, but it does not mean you wanted the harm, caused it, or should have seen it coming.

What children learn about love

Children don’t come into the world knowing what love is. They learn it from what they experience.

When caregivers are consistently available, responsive, and safe, children may develop expectations that close relationships can be reliable. They may learn that their needs deserve attention and that asking for help does not have to threaten connection. Those are important opportunities for learning, not guarantees about how they will feel or behave in every relationship as adults.

Not everyone who experiences an abusive relationship grew up with abuse, neglect, or conditional love. Some people had stable, loving childhoods and still encountered someone who became controlling or harmful. Others grew up in difficult circumstances and went on to have healthy relationships. Early experiences can influence what feels

familiar, but they do not determine what happens to you or explain away another person's choices.

If care or approval was unpredictable or conditional, you may have learned to watch closely for changes in how people responded to you. Some children in that position begin believing that connection must be earned by meeting other people's expectations, managing conflict, or asking for less. Others respond differently, and later relationships and support can change those expectations.

You learned this not through anyone explaining it to you but through the texture of daily life. Through what happened when you cried, or needed something, or made a mistake. Through what made the people around you warm and what made them cold or absent or angry. Through what it took, in that specific environment, to feel loved.

Some of what you learned early may stay with you after leaving home. It can influence what feels comfortable, how you respond when someone is upset, or what you believe you can ask for. But those expectations can also change through later experiences, supportive relationships, reflection, and time.

When chaos became home

Some people grew up in environments that were unpredictable. A parent whose moods shifted without warning. A home where the emotional temperature could change in minutes. Where you learned early to read a room, to watch for signs of what was coming, to manage yourself in relation to someone else's instability.

If you grew up watching for unpredictable reactions, some situations in an adult relationship may have felt familiar, including measuring your words or paying close attention to someone's mood. That similarity does not prove your childhood caused your adult responses. Ongoing control or intimidation in the adult relationship can itself lead someone to become more watchful.

For some people who grew up around unpredictability, calm or steady attention may initially feel unfamiliar. Others welcome it immediately, and many people with difficult childhoods do not confuse intensity with love. If stability feels unfamiliar to you, that is something you can explore without assuming your nervous system was trained to prefer harmful relationships.

When earning approval felt necessary

Some children live with approval tied to grades, behavior, achievement, or how much they need from adults. They may begin asking for less or working harder to avoid criticism or withdrawal. Those adjustments can be understandable attempts to manage an unpredictable home, but they do not make a child responsible for keeping that home safe.

If you learned early that love has to be earned, that it can be taken away if you get it wrong, that your value is contingent on what you produce or provide — those lessons may have stayed with you into adulthood. They may have influenced what you expected from relationships, what you felt responsible for, or how difficult it was to ask for what you needed.

As an adult, you might find yourself working hard for approval, hesitating to ask for help, or feeling afraid of losing a relationship. Earlier experiences can be one influence on those feelings, but they are not the only one. Someone else's coercion, threats, finances, children, and safety concerns can also shape what choices seem possible. None of that means you were responsible for another person's harmful behavior.

If you developed ways of coping with an unpredictable home, those responses may once have helped you get through difficult moments. Some may still be useful; others may no longer fit your circumstances. You can examine them without treating every habit as damage or assuming you should have known when to change it.

When familiarity and safety are not the same thing

Familiarity can feel reassuring. But when something familiar also involves fear, pressure, or the sense that you have to earn your place in the relationship, it deserves a closer look.

Some people look back on an early feeling of recognition or comfort in a relationship that later became painful. That feeling may have been genuine, but it cannot tell you in advance whether someone will become controlling. Familiarity and chemistry are not reliable tests of either safety or danger; behavior and respect for boundaries over time provide more useful information.

Familiarity is not the same as safety, but it is not automatically a warning sign either. Early experiences can be one influence on what

feels familiar, alongside later friendships, relationships, and personal preferences. If a familiar dynamic also involves pressure, fear, or repeated disregard for your needs, the conduct deserves attention regardless of where that familiarity came from.

This is not about dismissing chemistry or connection. It is about looking, when something feels intensely familiar, at what the familiarity is pointing to. Is it pointing toward something genuinely good? Or is it pointing toward something you already know how to survive?

What this understanding is for

Understanding possible influences from childhood does not mean you were destined to repeat them or that someone could have predicted the relationship you entered. Research can identify associations across groups, but it cannot determine why a particular person was targeted or harmed. Responsibility for abusive behavior stays with the person who chose it, regardless of anyone else's history.

Learning about earlier experiences may give you another way to understand your reactions and expectations. That information can be useful when making decisions, but insight alone does not guarantee a change in circumstances, and it does not remove practical barriers or safety risks. You do not have to resolve your childhood to take your present concerns seriously.

Looking at early experiences can help you notice some expectations you carry into relationships, such as whether asking for help feels difficult or whether you feel pressure to keep the peace. You can practice naming needs and paying attention to how others respond. No amount of insight guarantees that you will recognize every harmful pattern early or know in advance who will be safe.

That is the work. And it starts with being willing to look at what you learned, before you knew there was something to unlearn.

The next chapter looks more closely at growing up with a parent whose behavior was self-centered, dismissive, or controlling. We will focus on what a child may experience in that environment and how those experiences can sometimes influence later expectations, without diagnosing a parent or assuming a particular adult outcome.

Chapter 22 — Narcissistic Parenting: Growing Up Inside It

You were a child. You did not choose the family you grew up in or how adults treated you. If a parent regularly put their own feelings, image, or needs ahead of yours, that may have shaped what you expected from closeness. Some lessons may have stayed with you into adulthood; others may not have. What happened to you matters without deciding who you would become.

This chapter is not about diagnosing your parents. Their behavior may have been harmful whether or not any clinician ever assessed them. We are going to look at repeated experiences, how they may affect children, and what you can make of those experiences now. A label is not required.

What it looks like inside a home like this

Some parents move between warmth and criticism or withdrawal. Others are consistently harsh, intrusive, or dismissive. A child may begin monitoring the mood at home or adjusting what they say to avoid another difficult reaction. Children respond differently, and a pattern of harmful behavior is more informative than trying to assign a diagnosis.

Some of what this looks like:

In some homes, a child's accomplishments are treated mainly as something for the parent to display. A parent may speak about a good grade, performance, or award in terms of the family's reputation while paying little attention to how the child feels. When a child struggles, they may face criticism or embarrassment instead of support. What matters is the repeated response the child receives, not a conclusion about the parent's private motives.

The parent's feelings came first, regularly and without much question. If they were upset, the household adjusted. Your feelings, needs, or distress were often minimized, dismissed, or made into an inconvenience. You may have learned not to have too many needs —

not to cry too much, not to be sick at the wrong time, not to bring problems home that required attention and care.

In some homes, a parent expects to read messages, enter rooms without asking, or control friendships while treating the child's questions as disrespectful. Parents do have responsibilities to supervise children according to their age and safety needs. The concern is repeated intrusion, humiliation, or control that leaves little room for age-appropriate privacy and independence.

A child may notice that warmth and attention seem easier to obtain when they meet a parent's expectations, and harder when they disagree, struggle, or need help. That can make approval feel conditional. We cannot know from those moments what a parent felt inside. We can look at what was said, what happened afterward, and how it affected the child.

Favoritism, scapegoating, and sibling comparisons

In some families, children receive very different amounts of criticism, attention, freedom, or support. Differences are not automatically abusive: children can have different needs and circumstances. But repeated unfair favoritism, humiliation, or blame can hurt, especially when a child has no clear or reasonable explanation for the difference.

One child may receive frequent praise or be excused when things go wrong, while another is criticized or blamed more harshly for similar behavior. When the same action receives very different responses without a clear, reasonable explanation, a child may feel confused or unfairly singled out. Those differences deserve attention without assuming that every difference in treatment is unjustified or that the child should have understood why it happened.

People sometimes call these positions the "golden child" and the "scapegoat." Those are informal descriptions, not clinical roles or proof of narcissism. Research does find links between unfair differences in parental treatment and children's adjustment. The useful question is what each child experienced, not whether everyone fits a fixed family role.

Sibling comparisons can sting. “Why can’t you be more like your sister?” may sound small once, but when comparisons become a repeated way of criticizing or withholding approval, children may start measuring themselves against each other. Some carry that habit into later relationships; others do not. The pattern matters without predicting a particular outcome.

Being favored does not mean a child escaped pressure, and it does not mean they necessarily felt anxious or guilty. Some children enjoy the extra attention; others feel uncomfortable about how a sibling is treated. Whatever the response, adults are responsible for treating their children fairly. The children did not create the imbalance.

Parentification: when a child becomes the caretaker

Parentification describes a pattern in which a child carries caregiving or emotional responsibilities that exceed what is developmentally appropriate or adequately supported. It may involve practical work, emotional support for an adult, or both. The question is not simply whether a child helped, but whether the demands, duration, and level of adult support compromised the child’s own needs.

Helping with chores or caring for siblings does not automatically mean a child was parentified. Age, duration, support, the child’s needs, and whether adults were still providing care all matter. Problems can arise when a child becomes a substitute parent, regular household caretaker, or emotional confidant in ways that overwhelm their developmental needs.

It can look like being the person a parent turns to after every argument — not to explain what happened, but to be comforted. It can look like a child who learns to monitor a parent’s mood and intervene before things escalate. It can look like being told family secrets and treated as a confidant. It can look like feeling personally responsible for whether a parent is happy or sad on a given day.

A child in that position may become quick to notice moods, anticipate what others need, or step in during conflict. Adults may praise that as maturity without seeing the pressure behind it. Some children experience distress or have less room for their own needs, but effects

vary with the kind of responsibility, available support, and the larger family situation.

For some people, taking responsibility for everyone else can remain a familiar habit in adulthood. For others it does not, or it changes with new relationships and support. A childhood role can help explain part of a person's experience without determining the relationships they will have.

What you learned

Children try to make sense of the treatment they receive. Some may come to believe that asking for help is risky or that keeping adults happy is their responsibility. Others draw different conclusions. These beliefs may last, change, or never develop in the first place.

You may have come to feel that other people's feelings mattered more than your own, or that asking for what you needed might bring criticism or withdrawal. You may have tried to keep the peace, become useful, or avoid disagreements as ways of coping. Those beliefs and responses vary, and none of them made you responsible for how an adult treated you or guaranteed your safety.

If you spent years watching a parent's mood, you may have learned to pay close attention to small changes in other people. That attentiveness may continue into adulthood, but not everyone develops it, and present-day stress or control can also make someone more watchful. It is not evidence by itself of what happened in your childhood.

If a parent repeatedly dismissed what you saw or felt, you may have started questioning your own perspective. That happens to some children, not all, and there can be many reasons for later self-doubt. The repeated dismissal still deserves to be recognized even if it never changed your confidence.

How it shows up later

None of this means that growing up with a narcissistic parent causes you to end up in a harmful relationship. Many people with this history form healthy relationships. And many people without it end up in harmful ones. The connection is not a guarantee in either direction.

Research suggests that some childhood relationship experiences are associated with later expectations and attachment, but those links are limited and do not explain why a particular adult becomes involved with someone controlling. Familiarity is not a test of safety or danger. Adult coercion, circumstances, support, and the other person's choices also matter.

If you learned early to keep track of an adult's feelings, you may recognize a similar habit in your relationships now. It might feel ordinary, or it might feel uncomfortable from the beginning. What matters is whether you are being pressured to take responsibility for another adult's reactions, not whether you can trace the habit back to childhood.

That distinction matters. Watching someone's moods can be something you learned long ago, something you began doing in a difficult adult relationship, or both. You do not have to know where it began to recognize when someone expects you to adjust around their reactions while your own needs go unheard.

If criticism was common in childhood, criticism from someone close to you may feel familiar. But familiarity does not mean you mistake hurtful treatment for love, and it does not predict whom you will trust. Pay attention to how a person speaks to you, handles disagreement, and responds when you say something hurts.

None of this makes you responsible for someone else's harm. Looking at possible influences from childhood may help you understand some reactions, but it cannot establish where every habit came from or guarantee change. You can take harmful behavior seriously and make decisions about your life without solving every question about your past.

The loyalty problem

One of the hardest things about examining a parent's behavior is that it conflicts with the relationship you have with that person — or the one you wanted to have with them, or the one you still hope is possible.

Saying that a parent did harmful things, or created an environment that cost you something, can feel like a betrayal. Like you are being

disloyal, or ungrateful, or making mountains out of what other people managed to survive without complaint.

None of that changes what happened. And understanding what happened is not the same as hating your parent, writing them off, or making them the villain in your own story. There may be things about your parent's history or struggles that you do not know. Understanding those circumstances can add context if you choose to explore them, but you do not need to explain or excuse their behavior in order to recognize its effect on you.

You are allowed to hold both things at once — that your parent did harm, and that it is complicated — without needing to collapse them into something simpler than they are.

What this chapter is not asking you to do

This chapter is not asking you to cut off your family, confront anyone, or reach a verdict on your childhood before you are ready. It is not asking you to decide right now what category your parent falls into or whether the word narcissistic applies to them.

You can look at whether messages from childhood still influence your expectations, while also recognizing what later relationships have taught you. You do not have to decide that everything you learned was wrong, confront anyone, or reach a fixed conclusion about your past. Some expectations may change with time, support, and safer circumstances.

Examining your childhood, if you choose to, is one possible part of understanding your life. It is not a requirement for recovery or for taking your current concerns seriously.

The next chapter examines what people mean by "trauma bonding" and how emotional attachment can coexist with harmful treatment. We will also keep the limits of that term clear. Leaving a harmful relationship can involve danger, money, children, housing, support, and many other realities beyond attachment alone.

Chapter 23 — Why It’s Called a Trauma Bond — And What That Actually Means

People ask this question in different ways.

Why do I miss someone who treated me so badly? Why do I still want to reach out to them, even after everything? Why does the person I know hurt me feel like the person I can’t live without? Why does leaving feel like losing something precious instead of escaping something harmful?

The term trauma bonding can help describe why some people remain emotionally attached in relationships involving abuse, especially where harm and periods of closeness occur together. It is one possible way of understanding those feelings, not a diagnosis and not the explanation for every person who misses or stays connected to someone who hurt them.

What a trauma bond is

Trauma bonding is a term used for a strong emotional attachment that may develop in a harmful relationship, particularly where mistreatment, an imbalance of power, and periods of kindness or relief occur together. It describes a possible pattern, not a test that can tell you exactly what any one person is experiencing.

The word “bond” matters because people can feel genuinely attached to someone who harms them. That attachment may make separating emotionally difficult, but it does not mean attachment is the only reason someone stays or returns. Safety, children, money, housing, and other circumstances may matter just as much or more.

Repeated shifts between mistreatment and periods of relief can strengthen attachment in some harmful relationships. Not every abusive relationship follows a recognizable cycle, and fear, isolation, dependence, and other circumstances may also help explain why a connection persists.

How changing treatment may affect attachment

Think back to the changing treatment discussed in Chapter 20. Some relationships include tension or harm followed by calmer periods, apologies, or renewed closeness. Those shifts can make a connection confusing and difficult to untangle, especially when the person who hurt you is also someone you sometimes turn to for comfort. But not every abusive relationship follows that sequence.

When harm is followed by warmth, the relief may feel unusually powerful. After distance or cruelty, an ordinary kind moment can carry a great deal of hope. That does not prove the warmth is false or that everyone experiences it in the same way; it helps explain why the contrast itself can matter.

This is not a character flaw. Intermittent reinforcement is a term used when a response is rewarded unpredictably rather than every time. Research has shown that some behaviors reinforced unpredictably can become especially persistent. In a harmful relationship, unpredictable periods of warmth or reconciliation may contribute to the difficulty of disengaging. But a relationship involves far more than a simple reward schedule.

Stressful or frightening experiences can affect the body's arousal and stress responses. When the immediate threat ends, the contrast between distress and relief can feel powerful. For someone experiencing repeated harm and reconciliation, that relief may become closely associated with reconnecting to the same person who caused the distress. The exact biological processes vary, and they are not a simple chemical explanation for why someone stays attached.

Why painful and caring memories can coexist

One reason a harmful relationship can be so difficult to make sense of is that the same person may have caused serious pain and also shared moments of tenderness, laughter, or comfort. You do not necessarily stop caring about someone the moment you recognize what they did. Those feelings can coexist without making the harm acceptable.

Some survivors describe missing the caring moments while clearly remembering the harm. Others feel anger, grief, relief, or a mixture

that changes from day to day. You may remember both sides of the relationship without having to pretend the good moments erased what happened.

For some people, a connection marked by dramatic shifts may leave complicated feelings after it ends. They may miss the intensity, the familiar routines, or the person they hoped the other person could become. Others feel relief or begin appreciating steadier relationships right away. There is no required emotional sequence, and calm does not have to feel empty.

What this is not

Trauma bonding is not proof that you wanted to be harmed, and it does not mean something is wrong with your character. You may have loved the person. You may still care about them. Those feelings do not excuse their behavior or create an obligation to remain in a harmful relationship.

The other person is responsible for their harmful choices. You are not responsible for being mistreated. Whatever mixture of attachment, hope, fear, history, or dependence you experienced, having those feelings does not mean you caused the abuse or consented to it.

It also does not mean the connection you felt was imaginary. You may have genuinely loved the person, cared about them, or felt deeply attached. If the term trauma bonding helps describe your experience, it does not make those feelings less real. And if the term does not fit, you can still recognize the harm without needing a particular explanation for why you cared.

One more thing worth saying: trauma bonding is a descriptive term, not a formal clinical diagnosis. It can help explain why an attachment persists in a harmful relationship, but it does not establish what the other person intended or prove a specific neurological mechanism. It is a framework for making sense of your experience — not a verdict on what happened or why.

Understanding the concept does not erase the feelings. It gives you language for them that does not make you the problem.

What it means for healing

Leaving a harmful relationship does not necessarily end the attachment. Some people experience intense longing or an urge to reconnect afterward. Others initially feel relief, numbness, fear, or grief. These responses can change over time, and none of them determines whether leaving was the right decision.

For some people, attachment persists after separation. They may miss the person, grieve the relationship, or feel an urge to reconnect, even while knowing they were hurt. Others feel primarily relief or distance. The feelings can change, and their presence or absence does not prove that you made the wrong choice.

Learning about trauma bonding may help you put words to feelings that have been difficult to explain. It may also turn out not to fit your experience. Either way, knowing a relationship was harmful and still having complicated feelings about it are not contradictions you have to solve overnight.

There is no single timetable or required path for working through attachment after harm. Safe distance, supportive relationships, counseling, or other resources may help, depending on your circumstances. If separation or limiting contact could increase danger, or if you share children, finances, or housing, choices about contact deserve individual safety planning rather than a blanket rule. Your options belong to you.

That is covered in more depth in later chapters. The purpose of this chapter is to give you the concept itself, so that the feelings that may not have made sense — the longing, the grief, the difficulty leaving, the intensity of the connection — have somewhere to land that is not self-blame.

The next chapter begins the section on why people stay — not as a judgment, but as an explanation. Strong people stay in harmful relationships. Understanding why is not about finding fault. It is about replacing shame with accuracy.

PART FOUR: WHY YOU STAYED — AND WHY LEAVING ISN’T SIMPLE

Chapter 24 — Why Strong People Stay

There is a question people ask, sometimes out loud and sometimes only to themselves:

Why didn't you just leave?

It is one of the most common questions survivors hear, and it can be painful. Whatever the person asking intends, the question can assume that leaving was a simple choice someone failed to make. It pictures an open door and a person who chose not to walk through it.

This chapter, and the two that follow, are about why that assumption is wrong. Not to excuse any behavior. Not to construct an argument. Just to describe, as accurately as possible, what actually keeps people in harmful relationships — because the answer is not weakness, not stupidity, not a failure to love themselves enough. The answer is complicated, and it deserves to be treated that way.

Who actually stays

Staying in a harmful relationship is not a thing that happens only to people who have low self-worth, poor judgment, or no support. It happens to people with careers, education, strong friendships, financial independence, and clear opinions about how relationships should work.

It happens to people who would look at someone else's situation and say, without hesitation, *that's not okay, you should leave.*

It happens to people who have already left one relationship that wasn't right and thought they knew better now. It happens to people who are described by everyone around them as strong, capable, and self-aware.

Strength is not a protection against this. And recognizing that is not about diminishing strength — it is about being accurate about what this is. A riptide does not sort for weak swimmers.

How strengths can be drawn into the dynamic

Here is something worth saying directly: loyalty, empathy, determination, and the willingness to work through hard things are not weaknesses. Those qualities may be part of why someone keeps trying to repair a relationship. But they do not explain everyone's decision to stay, and they cannot be separated from concerns about safety, children, finances, threats, housing, and available support.

Loyalty means keeping your commitments. When you have promised yourself to someone, leaving can feel like a failure of that commitment — even when the other person has not been loyal in return. The same quality that makes someone a steady, trustworthy partner can make it very difficult to accept that the relationship is not what they thought it was.

Empathy means trying to understand what someone else is going through. When a partner describes a difficult childhood, a struggle, or remorse after causing harm, you may want to understand them. That response is not naivety. But understanding a person's difficulties does not establish why they acted harmfully, excuse repeated harm, or make you responsible for changing them. You can care about their circumstances and still take their behavior seriously.

Determination means not giving up. It means working on problems rather than walking away from them. In a relationship that could genuinely improve, that quality matters enormously. In one where only one person is doing the work, determination can become the thing that keeps someone trying to solve a problem that cannot be solved alone.

None of this means the person was foolish. It means they brought real and valuable qualities to a situation where those qualities were not met with the same investment. The fault for that is not in the qualities themselves.

The relationship is not what it looks like from outside

One of the most significant gaps between people inside a harmful relationship and people observing it from outside is that the people inside it have information the people outside do not.

They may know the person's private behavior, the good moments, the shared history, and the attention they received early in the relationship. They may remember promises and periods when things improved. Those experiences can make the relationship harder to describe from the outside, without proving that the early affection was a planned tactic or that every harmful relationship began the same way.

Some people recognize harmful behavior while they are still in the relationship. Others sense that something is wrong but cannot yet explain it. Recognizing harm and being able to leave are different things. Between those points, a person may try to repair the relationship, seek resources, weigh risks, make plans, leave and return, or remain for practical or safety reasons. There is no single timeline or sequence everyone follows.

From the outside, staying can look like a simple refusal to leave. From the inside, someone may be trying to repair the relationship, planning for safety, or weighing risks and resources other people cannot see. No single account explains every person's circumstances.

When harmful behavior develops or changes over time

Chapter 9 described how some harmful patterns develop or become more recognizable over time. Gradual change can make a pattern harder to see while you are living through it, but abuse does not always start subtly or escalate in the same way. Some people recognize serious danger early and still face barriers to leaving.

If serious control or cruelty had been visible at the beginning, you might have recognized a problem sooner. But recognizing it is not the same as being able to leave safely. Sometimes harmful behavior emerges or becomes more frequent over time, and each incident is considered alongside the relationship's history. In other situations the danger is clear from the start. Neither situation tells you how easy it would have been to leave.

By the time an outsider recognizes the behavior as harmful, the person living with it may already have made many adjustments, formed attachments, or built a shared life. They may also have recognized the harm clearly for a long time. Connection and hope can matter, but so can threats, money, children, housing, access to support, and the risks

of separation. Leaving cannot be judged from the outside by how obvious the behavior seems.

What holds people

Beyond how the dynamics develop, there are specific forces that make leaving genuinely difficult — not as a matter of willpower, but as a matter of real circumstance. Fear of what will happen after leaving. Love for the person, or for who the person sometimes is. Children. Financial entanglement. Hope. These are not excuses. They are the actual texture of why leaving is complicated, and each of them deserves more than a line. The next chapter goes into them.

What this means

This chapter is for anyone who has asked themselves why they did not leave sooner and started treating that question as evidence of a personal failure. It is also for people who want to understand why someone may remain in a harmful relationship even when the harm is clear. The circumstances are not always visible from the outside.

Staying does not mean weakness. Loyalty, empathy, and determination can be part of the story for some people, but they are never the whole explanation. Fear, threats, children, money, housing, disability, and access to safe help can matter just as much or more. You do not have to defend why you stayed to recognize what happened. Understanding the circumstances can replace judgment with a more accurate picture and help you consider your options on your own terms.

The next chapter looks more closely at the specific emotions and circumstances that hold people in harmful relationships — hope, fear, dependence, and others — because understanding the texture of why helps more than a general statement that it was complicated.

Chapter 25 — Hope, Fear, Dependence, and All the Other Reasons

If the previous chapter established that strong, capable people stay in harmful relationships, this one is about the specifics. Not in the abstract — in the actual texture of what it feels like from inside.

Each of the forces covered here is real. They do not all apply to every relationship, and they are not all equally present in any one situation. But they appear often enough, in enough different kinds of relationships, that they deserve to be named plainly — not as excuses, not as a checklist of what you should have overcome sooner, but as an honest account of the actual landscape.

Hope

Hope is not a character flaw. People may hope a relationship will improve because they remember good periods, hear promises, see some changes, or care about the future they planned. Hope can be understandable without telling you whether lasting change is likely.

A harmful relationship may include good moments, shared history, apologies, and periods when things improve. Some relationships begin with warmth and become harmful later; others show serious warning signs early. A person may recognize harm at any stage and still face barriers to leaving safely.

Those good periods happened, and they may help explain why someone still hopes. But memories of warmth or an apology do not, by themselves, establish that harmful behavior has changed or that future safety is assured.

The difficulty is that in a relationship with a repeating harmful pattern, good periods and sincere-seeming apologies are reasons to hope — but they are not evidence that lasting change is happening. A period of warmth after harm can feel like proof that the relationship can be what you hoped it would be. It is not the same as the relationship actually

becoming that. The pattern continuing is what tells you something that the good moments, by themselves, cannot.

This does not mean every expression of remorse is calculated, or that hope explains why everyone stays. In a relationship where harmful behavior repeats, hopeful memories and promises may influence someone's decisions. Fear, resources, children, threats, and other circumstances can be at least as important. Lasting change is better judged by sustained behavior than by a brief good period.

Fear

Fear is one of the most direct reasons someone stays in a harmful relationship, and also one of the most minimized.

Outsiders sometimes imagine that if a relationship is dangerous, leaving must be immediately safer. That is not always true. Separation or an attempt to leave can be a particularly dangerous period in some abusive relationships, especially where threats, stalking, coercive control, or prior violence are present. The risk is not identical in every case, and no one can predict an individual outcome from a general pattern.

Fear about leaving may reflect serious, credible threats or past behavior. It may also be shaped by uncertainty about money, housing, children, or support. You do not have to prove that every feared outcome would happen for those concerns to deserve attention. Individualized safety planning can help someone consider their options without pressure.

Fear also takes other forms. Fear of being alone. Fear of financial instability. Fear that the other person's account of the relationship is the one that people will believe. Fear of losing relationships with mutual friends or family members who have been drawn into the other person's circle. Fear that you will not be believed, or that what you experienced will be minimized — and what that means practically: being cut off from support, losing custody, having legal or professional consequences follow from a story you had no chance to respond to.

None of these fears are small. And none of them are simply overcome by deciding to be less afraid.

Love

Many people in harmful relationships love the person they are with. Some love the person they believed the other person could become. Some love the person who existed in the early months. Some love specific, real moments in the relationship that cannot be entirely dismissed.

Love does not necessarily disappear because a relationship is harmful. It does not establish that staying is poor judgment, nor does it prove what the other person felt or intended. Someone can care deeply about a partner and still recognize that repeated harm needs to be taken seriously.

Love can be one reason someone tries again, accepts an apology, or gives a relationship more time. But love does not require someone to tolerate repeated harm, and it is not the only reason leaving may be difficult. When one person keeps absorbing the consequences of another person's behavior without meaningful change, that repeated imbalance matters.

Dependence

Dependence can be financial, practical, emotional, or some combination of all three.

Financial dependence can develop in many ways. Sometimes it is the result of deliberate control — Chapter 19 described how access to money can be restricted, how employment can be undermined, how economic isolation can be used as a tool. But financial dependence also develops through ordinary circumstances: one person stepping back from work to raise children, a period of unemployment, illness, a career that never took off, or simply two people building a life together in a way that now cannot be cleanly separated. Whether the dependence was engineered or developed naturally, the practical obstacle is real. Leaving is not just an emotional decision. It requires resources, options, and stability that may not be in place.

Practical dependence takes different forms. Shared housing. A visa or immigration status tied to the relationship. A job or business that

cannot easily be separated. Each of these creates real constraints that go beyond the emotional question of whether to leave.

When children are involved, the considerations expand further. There are concerns about their safety and stability — including what happens to them if the other parent has unsupervised access, or how custody arrangements might be used as leverage. There are questions about what leaving will cost practically — in legal fees, in disruption, in the daily reality of co-parenting someone you are trying to separate from. And there are beliefs, sometimes accurate, sometimes not, about whether staying is better for the children than the alternative. Those concerns are real, and they deserve more than a line. Chapter 30 goes into them in depth.

Emotional dependence can develop when a partner becomes an important source of comfort, practical support, or stability, even if that relationship also involves harm. Isolation can intensify this dependence, but it is not required. Chapter 23 described traumatic bonding as one possible framework for understanding attachment in some abusive relationships, not a diagnosis or an explanation that applies to everyone.

Isolation

Isolation deserves its own mention because it changes the landscape of leaving in ways that are easy to underestimate from outside.

Chapter 17 described how other people can be drawn into a harmful relationship dynamic — friends who become informants, family members who are managed, social circles that are shaped by the person with controlling patterns. The result, in many cases, is that the person experiencing harm has fewer people to turn to than they once did. The network that might provide support, perspective, or practical help has been thinned over the course of the relationship.

Leaving is easier when you have somewhere to go — people to call, places to stay, connections that survived the relationship intact. When those connections have been reduced, the question of leaving becomes more practical and more frightening in ways that are not visible to people who still have their networks.

What people mean when they say they just weren't ready

There is a phrase survivors use sometimes — that they weren't ready to leave yet — and it is easy to hear that as a statement of emotional unpreparedness, something that could have been overcome sooner with the right mindset or enough encouragement.

Sometimes feelings change over time. A person may lose hope, become more concerned about danger, or decide the relationship is no longer workable. Others recognize the harm clearly long before they can act on that understanding. There is no fixed emotional turning point or timetable for leaving.

But "not ready" can also describe concrete barriers: no safe place identified, little accessible money, concerns about children, threats of retaliation, or few trusted people to call. These are not simply attitudes someone can think their way through. Depending on the circumstances, tailored safety planning, advocacy, emergency assistance, or other resources may help, whether a person stays for now or leaves.

Both emotional concerns and practical barriers deserve attention, but they do not always follow separate stages. Someone may recognize the harm and want to leave while facing serious safety or resource constraints. Someone else may be uncertain about the relationship and still benefit from practical options and support. The useful question is what help fits the person's situation and choices, without assuming they must first reach a particular emotional turning point.

This is not resignation. Understanding someone's circumstances can make support more useful than pressuring them to leave before their safety and practical needs have been considered. Pressure or judgment may make it harder for some people to seek help or explain what is preventing them from leaving. The goal is to offer options and support that fit their situation, without assuming one answer works for everyone.

The next chapter examines the sunk-cost effect: how time, effort, and the life someone has invested may influence decisions about a harmful relationship. That influence can be real for some people, but it does not replace the safety and practical considerations discussed here.

Chapter 26 — The Sunk Cost: When Leaving Feels Like Losing

You have given a lot to this relationship.

Years, possibly. Time that you spent trying to make it work, trying to understand what was happening, trying to get to the good version of things. Energy spent managing someone else's moods, holding yourself carefully, navigating conversations that felt like minefields. The person you were when you entered the relationship — the trust you brought, the openness, the specific kind of hope that belongs to the beginning — some of that is different now.

Some of that cannot be recovered. The years, the energy, the trust you extended — those are spent. What happens to them does not change based on what you decide now.

This is what is meant by a sunk cost: something already invested that cannot be returned. And the sunk-cost effect is what happens when that past investment starts driving future decisions — when the question "should I stay?" gets answered with "I've already given this twelve years."

What a sunk cost is

In decision-making, a sunk cost is something already spent that cannot be recovered. The money you paid for a concert you no longer want to attend. The time you have put into a project that is not working. The investment is gone whether you continue or not. What you do next should, rationally, depend on what is likely to happen going forward — not on what you have already spent.

The sunk-cost effect is the pull to keep investing because of what you have already put in — even when the future does not justify continued investment. It is a recognizable pattern. And in a relationship that has been harmful over a long period, that pull is not just a cognitive habit. It is attached to something real: actual years, actual experiences, actual self that went into this relationship. The feeling that leaving means

losing all of it — that all that time and effort and hope will have been wasted — is one of the most painful aspects of deciding to leave.

What the investment looks like

The investment in a long relationship is not just time. It is also:

The version of yourself you brought to it. If you gave this relationship your trust, your vulnerability, your effort — if you showed up honestly and tried hard — then leaving involves acknowledging that those things were spent in a situation that did not give them back. That is a specific kind of grief.

The life you built around it. Shared friends. A sense of your own future that was organized around this relationship. When you leave, you are not just leaving the person. You are leaving an entire structure of daily life and future expectation.

It is worth distinguishing between what has already been spent and what is still being decided. The years and the trust you gave are sunk — they are not returned either way. But shared property, finances, housing, parenting arrangements, and other practical circumstances are present and future considerations. How those are resolved depends on what happens next. They are not sunk costs. They are part of what leaving actually involves, and they are worth planning around rather than treating as already lost.

The years. The older you are, or the longer the relationship went on, the more this particular weight can grow. “I gave the best years of my life to this” is a real feeling, and it deserves to be treated as one rather than dismissed. You cannot get those years back. That is true. What is also true is that the years ahead matter, too.

The identity. Some people’s sense of who they are has been shaped, over time, by the relationship — by being part of a couple, by their role in the relationship, by the way the relationship organized their life. Leaving means figuring out who you are outside of it, which is not a small task.

When shame gets added to the sunk cost

There is a related pressure that often operates alongside sunk-cost thinking in harmful relationships — not exactly the same thing, but worth naming in the same chapter because it compounds the difficulty of leaving in a similar way.

If you were told, repeatedly, that you give up too easily. That you don't fight for things. That you can't make a relationship work. That you're not patient enough, committed enough, willing enough to do the hard work — then leaving starts to feel like evidence for those accusations. Like you are proving that everything they said about you was correct.

Staying becomes a way of refusing to let that be the conclusion. If you leave, you lose the relationship and you become the person they said you were. If you stay and keep trying, at least you can maintain the counter-argument.

This is one of the most insidious ways that the dynamics described in earlier chapters extend their effect. The criticism was not accurate when it was delivered. But it was delivered enough times, in ways damaging enough to your confidence, that the shape of it stayed. And now it has become a reason to stay inside a relationship that continues to cause harm.

You do not have to prove anything by staying. What matters is what is safe and possible for you now.

What leaving actually means for the investment

This is worth saying directly, even though it is hard:

The years you spent in this relationship are yours. They happened. They are part of your history regardless of how the relationship ends. Leaving does not erase them or make them worthless. It ends the relationship without undoing what you lived.

The time already spent cannot decide what is possible or safest now. The decision ahead depends on what the relationship is doing today, what is likely to happen next, and what options and support are actually available. Recognizing a sunk cost can help you stop treating past effort as a debt you owe the future. It does not make leaving simple, safe, or immediately possible.

What you do with the time after this relationship is not a consolation prize for a failed investment. It is your actual life, happening in real time, with the possibility of what happens next.

What happens to the grief

None of this resolves the grief. Knowing that the sunk cost is real, knowing the logic of it, does not make the feeling of loss go away. And it should not. What you are grieving is real — the relationship you wanted this to be, the years, the person you thought you were building something with.

Grief after a harmful relationship is complicated because it coexists with relief, anger, confusion, and sometimes the continuing pull of the attachment described in Chapter 23. You can grieve something that also hurt you. Those are not contradictory feelings.

What understanding the sunk cost can do is give you a clearer picture of what is driving the pull to stay. So that when you feel you cannot leave because of everything you have already put in, you can name what that feeling is — and separate it from a rational assessment of what the future actually looks like from here.

The chapters that follow move into the effects of these relationships on your body, your sense of self, and your relationships with other people — and then into what it looks like to begin building something after.

PART FIVE: THE HARM IT LEAVES BEHIND

Chapter 27 — What It Does to Your Nervous System

You may have noticed that your body is different now.

Not in a dramatic way, necessarily. But in the ways that add up over time, in ways you might not have connected to the relationship itself. You startle more easily. You are exhausted in a way that sleep does not fully fix. You find yourself scanning rooms when you walk in. You tense up at certain sounds — a phone notification, a door, a particular tone of voice. You are hyperaware of the people around you in ways you were not before.

Or maybe the opposite. You feel flat. Numb. Like your emotional range has narrowed. Like the things that used to matter don't quite reach you the way they did.

Both of these can be responses to prolonged stress. And both are worth understanding, not because giving them a name makes them disappear, but because understanding what is happening in your body changes how you relate to it.

What prolonged stress does

The body has systems for responding to threat. When something frightening or dangerous happens, those systems activate — heart rate increases, attention narrows, muscles prepare. Those responses are useful. They are designed for short-term threat.

What they are not designed for is sustained exposure over months or years. When the environment is persistently unpredictable, when safety is uncertain, when conflict or threat is chronic rather than acute, the body has to find ways to manage that over time.

People respond differently. Some describe a state of heightened readiness that persists even when nothing is immediately happening — scanning for danger, interpreting ambiguous signals as threatening, unable to fully relax. Others experience something closer to numbness, flatness, or reduced responsiveness. Many experience a combination of

both at different times. These different responses are covered in more detail below.

That is not necessarily a personality trait. It can be a response to a prolonged experience.

Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn

When the body perceives threat, it moves toward a response. Most people have heard of fight or flight — the impulse to confront the danger or get away from it. But there are two other responses that show up frequently in prolonged, relational harm, and they are worth naming.

Freezing can happen automatically in the face of threat. The body may become still. When danger feels inescapable, a related response called tonic immobility can leave someone unable to move or speak. Someone experiencing this may stand there while something is happening to them, unable to respond in the way they later wish they had. That inability is not weakness or complicity. These responses can happen automatically, without a conscious decision.

Fawn is a descriptive term — not a clinical diagnosis or an established physiological response in the same category as fight or flight — used to describe the pattern of appeasing in the face of threat: managing, placating, or accommodating the person who is the source of danger, in order to prevent escalation. If you found yourself becoming very agreeable in moments of conflict, working to calm the other person down, taking on blame to end a confrontation, or adjusting yourself to prevent harm — that is the pattern the term describes. It is a way of trying to create safety by reducing the threat from another person rather than by fighting or escaping.

People can experience different responses at different times, and in different situations. The same person might freeze in one confrontation and fawn in another. These are descriptive terms for recognizable patterns of response, not categories that sort people into fixed types.

Hypervigilance

Hypervigilance is the word used for a state of heightened alertness — scanning for signs of danger even when no immediate threat is present.

In an environment where someone's moods shifted without warning, where conflict arose unpredictably, where certain expressions or tones of voice signaled what was coming next — paying close attention to those signals was adaptive. It helped you prepare. It was, in a real sense, something your body learned to do because doing it helped you navigate the situation.

For many people, that state does not simply stop when the situation changes. If hypervigilance developed during the relationship, it may continue for some time afterward. You might notice it as: difficulty sleeping, because the monitoring doesn't switch off at night. Difficulty concentrating, because attention keeps moving to the edges of the room rather than the task in front of you. Being startled by ordinary sounds. Reading other people's expressions and tone of voice with a level of attention that exhausts you. Feeling on edge without being able to identify why.

If you recognize some of this, it does not mean something is permanently wrong with you. It may mean your body adapted to a situation that required constant alertness, and that the adaptation is still running. People's experiences vary — some find these responses fade relatively quickly once circumstances change, while for others they persist longer and may benefit from professional support.

Fatigue

Chronic stress is physically tiring in ways that do not respond straightforwardly to rest.

The body systems that maintain a stress response use energy. So does the monitoring, the emotional regulation, the management of someone else's moods, the vigilance, the sustained state of uncertainty. People who have lived in this kind of environment for a long time frequently describe an exhaustion that goes beyond ordinary tiredness — a bone-deep fatigue that persists even after sleep.

There are also specific costs to emotional labor: the sustained work of managing your own responses, managing the other person's responses, holding yourself carefully in conversations, suppressing reactions that might escalate things. That labor does not feel like physical exertion in the moment, but it has physiological costs.

If you are exhausted in ways that seem disproportionate to what you are doing, that is worth taking seriously rather than pushing through. Rest and recovery look different when what the body is recovering from is prolonged stress rather than a single acute event.

The flattening

Some people describe the opposite experience from hypervigilance: a kind of emotional flatness, a narrowed range, a difficulty accessing feelings that used to be available.

This can be a response to sustained overwhelm. After prolonged stress or trauma, some people experience numbness, dissociation from their own experience, or a reduced ability to feel things fully. It can look like depression, though it is not always depression in the clinical sense. It can feel like being behind glass, watching your own life rather than living it.

It is also worth distinguishing between suppressing feelings and experiencing reduced feelings. Someone can still feel an emotion strongly while concealing it — that is a choice, or a protective habit, made in relation to the external environment. That is different from actually experiencing a narrowed emotional range, difficulty accessing feelings, or a sense of detachment from one's own experience. Both things happen, and they can look similar from the outside, but they are not the same.

Complex PTSD

Some people who have experienced harmful relationships develop symptoms that go beyond the stress responses described above — a pattern sometimes referred to as complex PTSD. It is worth naming here, because if you have heard the term and wondered whether it applies to you, understanding what it describes can help.

Complex PTSD is not simply a more severe version of other stress responses. Under the ICD-11 framework, it can develop after extremely threatening or horrific experiences. It requires the core symptoms of PTSD — reliving the trauma as if it is happening now, avoiding reminders, and a continuing sense of threat — together with severe, persistent difficulties in three areas: managing emotions, seeing

yourself as diminished or worthless with shame, guilt, or feelings of failure connected to the trauma, and maintaining relationships or feeling close to other people. The symptoms must persist for at least several weeks and significantly interfere with daily life. It is the combination that matters, not the additional features alone. Someone experiencing this might find themselves overwhelmed by feelings that seem disproportionate to what triggered them. They might carry a persistent belief that something is fundamentally wrong with them. They might find it very difficult to trust other people or to feel safe in close relationships.

Complex PTSD is recognized in the ICD-11 (an international diagnostic framework) but is not currently a separate diagnosis in the DSM-5-TR (the diagnostic manual most commonly used in the United States). Whether and how a clinician applies either framework depends on the specific symptoms and clinical judgment — which is one reason why a diagnosis requires a qualified professional, not a checklist.

Not everyone who experiences a harmful relationship develops complex PTSD, and many people experience some of these symptoms without meeting the criteria for a diagnosis. The presence of symptoms does not establish a diagnosis — that requires a qualified clinician. What it does is give you language for a pattern that may otherwise feel difficult to explain: why the effects of this relationship extend beyond the memories of specific incidents, into the way you feel about yourself and other people.

What this means practically

Understanding that these responses have a cause does not mean you are stuck with them indefinitely. It means you know what you are dealing with.

Recovery from prolonged stress can take time and may involve setbacks. That is not a failure of effort or will. What you have been managing, and for how long, can be part of that.

Some things that many people find helpful: physical safety first, and then consistency. Predictable environments, in which nothing terrible happens, can give the body different information about what to expect. Relationships that are consistent and safe — including therapeutic

relationships — are part of that. Sleep, movement, and time are also part of it for many people.

If the symptoms described in this chapter are persistent or significantly affecting your daily life, they deserve appropriate assessment — from a doctor, a therapist, or both. Fatigue, sleep disruption, difficulty concentrating, and emotional numbness can accompany prolonged stress, but they can also have medical or other mental-health causes. It is worth having a full picture rather than assuming any one explanation.

Chapter 37 goes into the physical dimension of healing in more depth. The purpose of this chapter is simply to name what may be happening in your body so that you can recognize it as something that makes sense given what you went through — not a character flaw, and not something you should be able to think your way out of.

The next chapter looks at what prolonged exposure to these dynamics does to your sense of self — the identity, confidence, and self-knowledge that may have shifted over the course of the relationship.

Chapter 28 — The Identity Erosion

At some point in this relationship, you may have noticed that you were not quite the same person you used to be.

Not in a dramatic, sudden way. It happened slowly, through accumulated small changes — things you stopped saying, opinions you stopped offering, parts of yourself you kept quieter than you once did. The person you were at the beginning of the relationship, the person your friends knew before, the person you recognized in the mirror — somewhere in there, some of that became less visible. Less present. Maybe even less real to you.

This is what identity erosion looks like. It is not something that happens because you are weak or because you let it happen. It is what can occur when the conditions in a relationship consistently communicate — through criticism, dismissal, control, or the sustained management of what you can say and do — that who you are is not acceptable, or is a problem, or needs to be different.

How it happens

Identity can erode through the accumulation of small adjustments, each of which made sense at the time.

You stopped bringing up a certain topic because it always led to conflict. You adjusted your tone when you spoke about your friends because it seemed to cause friction. You started dressing differently, or going out less, or not mentioning things that happened at work, because doing those things had costs that became too familiar. Each adjustment was a reasonable response to a specific situation. The sum of them, over time, was a person who had become considerably smaller than who they were.

The process is often gradual enough that it is hard to identify when it started or how far it has gone. Some people describe realizing, only after leaving the relationship, that they had stopped doing something they used to love — a hobby, a kind of music, a way of dressing, a habit of speaking their mind — without ever making a conscious decision to stop. It just happened, bit by bit, until it was gone.

There is a related but different pathway worth naming: sometimes the changes were not self-adjustments but direct restrictions. Being told what to wear, who to see, where to go, what work to take on. Being forbidden from certain friendships, threatened when spending time with family, pressured to stop activities or pursuits that were important. These are imposed changes, not gradual accommodations — and they carry their own kind of damage. Someone who was directly controlled may have experienced a sharp break from their own sense of agency. Both matter, and both are forms of identity erosion.

What criticism does over time

Sustained criticism — of how you think, how you talk, how you look, how you handle things, how you feel — does something to your internal reference point for yourself.

When you receive consistent negative feedback about who you are, from someone you are close to and whose opinion you have weighted heavily, it is natural for some of that feedback to get inside. Not all of it. Not necessarily consciously. But repeated messages about your flaws and inadequacies tend to leave a residue, particularly when they arrive with authority, with emotional charge, or in moments when you are already vulnerable.

You may have found yourself, at some point, hearing their voice in your head when you were making decisions. Second-guessing yourself in ways you did not before. Wondering if you were actually as difficult, sensitive, or irrational as you were told you were. The external criticism had become an internal critic.

That is not a character flaw. That is what happens when prolonged exposure to someone else's negative assessment of you begins to compete with your own assessment of yourself — and when the other person's version has had a lot of time and repetition to establish itself.

The confidence loss

Confidence in your own judgment tends to erode through similar repeated exposure.

Chapter 11 covered the gaslighting pattern in detail — the way repeated contradiction of your perception, memory, and read on events

creates broader uncertainty over time. What matters here is what that uncertainty does to your sense of self.

When you stop trusting your own perceptions, it changes how you move through the world. You may hesitate before forming an opinion, then qualify it heavily before saying it out loud. You may defer to others on decisions that should feel straightforward — not because you have no view, but because you have learned not to trust your view. You may feel chronically unsure, not about specific facts, but about yourself.

That shows up in the choices you make, the ones you avoid, the way you hold your own experience at a distance even after the relationship has ended. Rebuilding that trust — learning to take your own perceptions seriously again — is part of the longer work. We will return to it in Chapter 39.

When you lose track of what you actually want

One of the more disorienting aspects of identity erosion is losing track of your own preferences and desires.

Someone asks what music you want to listen to. And you pause. Not because you don't have a preference, but because for so long the question was not really yours to answer — you were already thinking about what they would like, what would create friction, what was worth pushing for and what was not. The question feels unfamiliar now. You have to reach for it.

If you spent a long time managing someone else's feelings, anticipating their reactions, calibrating your choices against their responses — your own wants may have been in the background for so long that they became unclear. What do you actually enjoy? What do you actually think? What would you choose if you were choosing only for yourself?

For some people, those questions feel surprisingly difficult to answer after a relationship like this. Not because the answers don't exist, but because the habit of centering another person's preferences was practiced so consistently, over so long, that the internal signal for one's own desires got quieter and quieter.

Finding those answers again is part of recovery. It is not about discovering a hidden true self that the relationship buried. It is about re-practicing the act of paying attention to what you actually feel and want, after a period of time in which that was not what your attention was directed toward.

You are not starting from nothing

It can feel that way. If you look at who you were before this relationship and who you are now, the distance can feel like loss — like the person you were is gone, and what remains is a diminished version.

That is not the full picture. The erosion happened in the context of what you were living through. What you lost access to, you can find your way back toward — though that process looks different for different people, and not everyone returns to exactly who they were before. Some people reconnect with much of their former sense of self. Others find that their experiences changed them, that their interests have shifted, that the life they are building does not look like the one they had before. Neither of those is failure.

What the relationship is not is the final word on who you are. Not everything that became less practiced, less expressed, or less visible is gone.

Recovery is not always reconstruction from scratch, and it is not always a return to a prior version of yourself. For many people it involves finding, again, the ability to pay attention to what they actually think and feel — and then deciding, from that place, what they want their life to look like. That takes time, and it is rarely linear. If you are still in an unsafe situation, that work may need to wait until safety is established first.

The next chapter looks at what this kind of relationship does to the relationships around it — friendships, family connections, and the social world that may have shifted or narrowed over the course of the relationship.

Chapter 29 — What It Did to Your Relationships

The damage may have extended beyond your relationship with that person. You may have lost other things along the way — friendships that quietly fell away, family members who didn't understand or took their side, the social world that steadily narrowed over the course of the relationship.

That is one of the less-talked-about parts of this. People focus on the central relationship — the romantic partner, the parent, the sibling. What often goes unacknowledged is the broader social damage that accumulated around it, to the other connections in your life.

This chapter is not only about relationships that have ended. Some people reading this are still in the situation. Some are dealing with a parent or sibling rather than a former partner. The social damage that accumulates in those situations is real too — the friendships that became harder to maintain, the family members who took sides, the people who drifted away while you were trying to manage something that consumed most of your attention.

How the circle gets smaller

It can happen so gradually that you barely notice it.

There are friends who kept inviting you, and you kept canceling, until they stopped. There are people you drifted from because getting together had become complicated — you had to explain your partner's behavior, or navigate their mood, or leave early, or not go at all. There are people you stopped confiding in because you were tired of defending choices you didn't fully understand yourself.

Some of it happened because of time. The relationship consumed so much of your attention, your energy, your mental bandwidth, that friendships that require investment began to suffer. Not because you wanted that, but because there was not enough left over.

Some of it happened because of them. Many survivors describe a gradual, steady process by which the people around them —

particularly those who expressed concern or asked difficult questions — became less welcome. Not always through explicit prohibition. Sometimes through complaints. Through comments that made you feel defensive of the relationship. Through criticism of your friends that made spending time with them feel fraught. Through behavior that made it hard to have people around.

By the time you look up, the circle is smaller than it was. And you may not be entirely sure how it happened.

When other people were used as tools

Chapter 17 described triangulation — the way other people can be pulled into a dynamic to serve a function. What is worth naming here is how that changes your relationship to those people.

When someone has used your family members or friends to validate their version of events, it complicates those relationships even after everything is over. Some of those people believed what they were told. Some of them may have repeated it. Some of them may have sided with the person who hurt you.

The primary relationship may not be the only one that was damaged. You may have lost people you expected to be in your corner.

The experience of watching people you trusted take someone else's side — especially after a smear campaign, especially after a split — is something many survivors describe as one of the most painful parts of the entire experience. Not the loss of the relationship itself, but the loss of faith in the people around it.

Isolation as a wound

Sometimes isolation is deliberate — a pattern of behavior that gradually reduces the number of people you can turn to for perspective, confide in, or ask for help. Chapter 19 described some of the ways that can happen.

Other times, relationships deteriorate through conflict, exhaustion, or the ordinary wear of circumstances. A friendship that fell away because you were always overwhelmed, always managing, never available — that is a loss even if no one orchestrated it. The result can look similar from the outside, and the wound is real either way.

You may come out of a situation like this with a social world that is significantly smaller than the one you went in with. And re-entering that world can be harder than people expect.

Some survivors describe a kind of social uncertainty that sets in after the relationship ends. After a long time in a relationship that required constant reading of another person's reactions, that required managing how you presented yourself and what you said, it can feel disorienting to be around people without those requirements. Some people describe pulling back from social situations not because they don't want connection, but because connection feels unfamiliar in a way they cannot quite name.

Others describe a wariness about trusting their instincts with new people. When you have been deceived by someone who seemed trustworthy, or when your reads on situations were consistently contradicted and dismissed, it can leave you uncertain about your own perceptions — not because your judgment failed, but because those experiences can make it harder to trust it.

Both of these are understandable. Neither means something is permanently broken.

What to do with friendships that survived — and ones that didn't

Some friendships survive a relationship like this. Some of them may have been quieter during the relationship, present but less central, waiting. Some friends may have kept the door open even when you were not in a position to walk through it. If those friendships are there for you now, they are worth tending.

Some relationships that did not survive may be worth rebuilding — if the person is open to it, if it feels safe, and if reconnecting is something you actually want. People who drifted away because you were unavailable may not have known what you were going through. They may not have known what to do with the distance. A conversation can sometimes close a gap that felt permanent. But reconnecting is never an obligation, and there is no timeline that says it should happen by now.

Some relationships will not come back. People who chose sides, people who actively participated in the harm, people who turned against you — you do not owe those relationships reconstruction. The fact that they were once part of your life does not mean they have to be again.

The family layer

Family relationships often carry their own complications after a relationship like this.

If your family liked the person you were with, the end of the relationship may come with a period of doubt or mourning on their side that feels like a lack of support on yours. If they didn't understand what was happening during the relationship, they may not fully understand what happened at the end of it.

If family members were actively recruited — if they were told things about you, or if they became part of the narrative — that creates wounds that exist alongside the primary ones, and they don't necessarily heal on the same timeline. A sibling who sided with an abusive partner. A parent who said "you need to try harder." A relative who repeated what they'd been told about you, to other relatives, without asking for your side. These are losses inside a loss, and they carry their own grief.

For some people, family was the primary relationship that was damaged by this. If the person who caused harm was a parent or sibling, the damage can extend into other connections in that system — the other parent, other siblings, extended family. That is a different kind of loss, and it requires its own time.

The relationships you built inside the relationship

One particular loss worth naming: when you have been in a relationship for a long time, some of your friendships may have been built together. Mutual friends. Couples who socialized together. A whole social life that existed partly in the context of being in that relationship.

When the relationship ends, those friendships often don't survive intact. Some people feel they have to choose. Others may choose

without being asked to. The social world that felt like yours may feel, suddenly, like it was both of yours — and may not feel available in the same way now.

That loss is real. It is not the same as the loss of the primary relationship, but it is a loss. The life that was built around that relationship, including its social infrastructure, may need to be rebuilt along with everything else.

Where things can go from here

The social world you have now may be smaller than the one you had before. For some people, it rebuilds. For others, the shape of it changes in ways they did not anticipate — different people, different kinds of connection, different priorities. Neither path is failure.

What is worth saying is that the difficulties you're having with friendship now do not mean you've lost your capacity for loyalty, for showing up, or for caring about people. What may have diminished is the energy and bandwidth to put those qualities into practice. That can look different as other parts of recovery progress, though that timeline is not the same for everyone. If you are still in an unsafe situation, safety comes first. You do not have to wait until the relationship ends to seek support from someone you trust or a domestic violence advocate, if you can do so safely.

Some people describe the relationships they form later — after they've had time to rebuild their sense of themselves — as more deliberate and more mutual than what they had before. Others find that some relationships never fully recover, and that is part of what this experience cost them. Both are honest accounts. This is not a chapter with a guaranteed ending. It is a chapter about naming what happened to your social world, so you can decide, from wherever you are now, what you want to do with it.

The next chapter turns to the specific situation of children — what they absorb, how co-parenting with someone like this tends to work, and how to protect them without using them.

Chapter 30 — When Children Are Involved

Children change everything about this.

They change what leaving looks like. They change how much contact you have to maintain with someone you are trying to get distance from. They change the legal landscape, the financial decisions, the daily logistics, and the emotional calculus of nearly every choice you make.

And they are watching. Children absorb more than most adults realize — not necessarily through what they are told, but through what they see, what they feel in a room, what goes unsaid.

This chapter is about what children experience inside these situations, what co-parenting or sharing a household with someone who has these patterns tends to look like, and how to protect your children without putting them in the middle of something they should not have to carry. Some of the situations described here involve separated parents. Others involve a stepparent, a partner in the household, an extended family member, or another adult whose behavior is affecting the children's daily life. The dynamics look different depending on the situation, but the core questions — what children absorb, how to talk to them, and how to protect them — apply across those variations.

What children absorb

Children do not need to witness direct harm to be affected by what is happening in a home. They are sensitive to tension, to inconsistency, to the emotional temperature of the people around them.

A child who grows up in a home where one parent walks on eggshells may learn, through watching, what that looks like — how to scan a room, how to read a mood, how to manage behavior in advance of a reaction. They may not have words for it. But they may be learning something about how relationships work, about how adults treat each other, about what it means to need something from another person.

Children are also skilled observers of contradiction. They notice when the person who is warmth and patience at the school pickup is different

at home. They notice when one parent changes their behavior depending on who is in the room. They may not articulate it, but they feel the gap — and it can be confusing in ways that take years to untangle.

Children who witness chronic conflict — particularly conflict that is one-sided in terms of accountability — may carry some of what they observed into how they understand relationships. Some children describe, as adults, having to unlearn patterns they absorbed in those early years — the hypervigilance, the people-pleasing, the difficulty trusting that calm is real. Others do not describe those effects in the same way. Children are not uniform in what they carry or how, and what they experience at home is one influence among many over the course of a life.

When children are directly targeted

Sometimes children are not bystanders — they become part of what is happening. This can take several forms.

Children may be used as messengers, asked to carry information between parents or report back on what happens at the other household. They may be drawn into adult conflicts they should not be part of. They may be used to make a point — to demonstrate something, to gain sympathy from a third party, or to exercise leverage.

A child comes home from a weekend visit and is asked, before they've taken their shoes off, what they did and who was there. They answer, then answer more questions, then notice the parent's face tightening. By the end of the conversation they are not sure whether they said something wrong. They didn't. But they have just been used as a source of intelligence in an adult conflict they cannot see or understand. They will think about their answers more carefully next time.

They may also be subjected to direct behavior: favoritism, dismissal, disproportionate criticism, being held to standards that shift unpredictably, being praised or condemned based on alignment rather than behavior. Children raised this way often describe a persistent

sense of trying to figure out what version of the parent they will get, and how to perform accordingly.

Having at least one adult in their life who is consistent, who listens to them, and who does not ask them to manage adult problems is something many children in difficult situations describe as meaningful. That is not a guarantee of any particular outcome — no parent can fully control what another adult does or what a child will carry from their experiences. But it is something real, and it matters.

Co-parenting with someone who has these patterns

Co-parenting with someone who repeatedly uses control or manipulation can be one of the more complex ongoing situations a person can be in. The relationship has ended, but the contact may not have. And the patterns that showed up in the relationship can show up in the co-parenting dynamic as well.

Some of what people commonly describe:

Visitation is withheld or threatened. Transitions become moments of conflict. Child support arrangements are drawn into ongoing dispute in ways that do not appear to center the children's actual needs.

Decisions that require cooperation are difficult to make. Medical decisions, school decisions, activity choices — things that should be straightforward become negotiated through conflict. Agreement in one conversation does not reliably hold the next time.

What children say at one home gets used in ways they did not intend. They are asked detailed questions when they come back. What they report is brought up later as evidence. The boundary between keeping up with the children's lives and gathering information about the other household gets blurred.

One parent may present very differently to outsiders — including to teachers, to coaches, to attorneys, and to court-appointed evaluators — than they present at home. This is one reason that professionals with limited contact sometimes reach conclusions that do not match a child's or parent's lived experience.

None of this is a reason to escalate or to bring children further into what is happening. It is a reason to document carefully if you can do so

safely, to get legal advice about co-parenting agreements, and to discuss whether more formal structure could help make the arrangement safer and less dependent on cooperation that may not be reliably available.

Parallel parenting

Traditional co-parenting involves a reasonable degree of communication, flexibility, and mutual goodwill between parents. When those things are not consistently possible — when every communication becomes a point of conflict, when flexibility is used to shift arrangements in ways that cause problems, when goodwill is not reliably returned — a different approach is sometimes recommended.

Parallel parenting reduces direct contact between parents to the minimum required. Communication is kept brief, in writing, and focused only on the children's immediate needs. Each parent handles day-to-day decisions during their own time, within the limits of the parenting agreement and applicable court orders. Major decisions, including medical and school decisions, depend on how legal decision-making authority is assigned. Exchanges are kept brief and business-like, sometimes with a neutral third party or at a public location.

This approach can help reduce the conflict children witness in some high-conflict situations. It is not automatically the right arrangement in every case. Ongoing abuse, stalking, or threats to a child's safety may make parallel parenting inappropriate. In those situations, the structure of any parenting arrangement — including whether contact is supervised or restricted — should be guided by safety planning, legal advice, and any court orders already in place. Parallel parenting is a tool, not a default. What it looks like in practice depends on the specific situation and what is actually safe.

How to talk to your children

Children need age-appropriate honesty without adult burdens. Those are two different things, and it matters to hold both at the same time.

Adult burdens look like: telling a child the details of what happened between their parents, sharing diagnoses or labels, asking them to carry

your version of the story and reconcile it with their own relationship with the other parent. Those things put adult weight onto a child who cannot do anything with it.

Age-appropriate honesty looks like: telling a child that what happened was not their fault, that certain behavior is not okay — including naming that something specific was scary or wrong if that is true. If safety has been established, you can tell them that. If it has not, do not promise something that isn't true. Children who have been in frightening situations may notice when something is wrong, and they are not helped by being told everything is fine when it isn't. What they need is to know that their experience was real, that you believe them, and that they can come to you if something feels unsafe.

What children do not need is to be pulled into adult accusations or adult conflict. What they do need is the ability to have their own experience — including complicated feelings. Some children in these situations feel love, fear, confusion, and anger all at once. Some have complicated relationships with both parents. Some eventually do not want contact with the parent who harmed them. Those are their feelings, and they deserve to be respected rather than managed in the direction that is most convenient for the adults around them.

Children also need a clear message: they can come to you if something feels wrong or unsafe, and you will take it seriously.

If a child tells you something concerning about what is happening at home, during visits, or with another adult, listen calmly and take it seriously. Let them use their own words. Do not coach them, press for details, or ask them to repeat the story over and over. If it is safe, write down what they said in their own words, with the date, and keep the record somewhere the other person cannot access. If you suspect abuse or neglect, report it promptly to the appropriate child protection agency or law enforcement in your area. Get professional guidance rather than confronting the person involved in a way that could put the child at risk. If the child is in immediate danger, contact emergency services as soon as you can safely do so.

The temptation to let children know what is really happening — to have them understand, to not feel like you are the only one carrying the

truth — is real. It is worth resisting. What you can offer them, even when you cannot control what happens around them, is as much consistency, safety, and support as your circumstances allow. That is not a guarantee of their outcome. And it is not something you have to provide without help.

When you are worried about your children's safety

Safety concerns are not limited to physical harm. Emotional abuse, intimidation, coercive control, and exposure to frightening behavior can themselves raise genuine safety concerns for children. The distinction is not between "patterns" on one side and "real danger" on the other — it is between situations requiring emergency action and other concerns that still deserve a timely response, including reporting suspected abuse or neglect when appropriate. Documentation and professional guidance can help, but they are not substitutes for reporting or emergency protection.

If you have concerns about your child's safety at home, during visits, or in the care of another adult, document specific incidents when it is safe to do so: dates, what happened, what your child said, any signs of distress afterward. Keep those records somewhere the other person cannot access. Talk to your child's pediatrician, their school counselor, or a therapist who works with children. If you suspect abuse or neglect, report it promptly to the appropriate local authority; you do not need to gather proof first. Reporting requirements and procedures vary by location. If custody or other legal issues are involved, get legal advice from an attorney who has experience with domestic violence and custody situations.

If you believe a child is in immediate danger, act on that. Contact emergency services (911 in the United States) as soon as you can safely do so, and seek urgent medical care if needed. A domestic violence hotline can help with safety planning, and a child protection agency can receive reports of suspected abuse or neglect, but neither replaces emergency services when immediate help is needed. Do not wait until documentation is assembled if a child needs protection now. If you have a court order or safety plan in place, it may guide your next steps — but in an emergency, immediate protection comes first. Get qualified legal and safety guidance about what any existing orders

require and permit in your specific situation; general guidance cannot substitute for advice from someone who knows your circumstances. The legal system does not always respond the way it should — that is addressed in Chapter 33 — but immediate danger is not the moment to wait.

Going into any legal process with detailed, documented records gives you more to work with than going in without them. And a professional who understands these dynamics — a family law attorney, a domestic violence advocate, or a therapist familiar with high-conflict situations — can help you think through what your specific situation requires.

You are not alone in this

Parenting through this kind of situation is exhausting in a way that is hard to describe. You are managing your own recovery while also trying to give your children what they need. You are navigating contact with someone you may need distance from. You are holding together a household that may still be in the middle of everything.

There are people who have been through this. There are therapists who specialize in high-conflict co-parenting. There are support groups, legal advocates, and professionals who understand the specific dynamics that show up in these situations. You do not have to work it out entirely on your own.

You do not have to have everything together to help your children. Safety and support for both of you matter. Start with what is safe and possible in your situation — and build from there.

The next chapter is about grief — the kind that comes after a relationship like this, and why it can be so difficult to explain to anyone who has not lived it.

Chapter 31 — Grief: Mourning Someone Who Is Still Alive

Nobody brought you a casserole.

Nobody said they were sorry for your loss. Nobody expected you to need time. Nobody understood why you were still not over it six months later, a year later, two years later — because from the outside, there was no death. The person is still alive. You just are not with them anymore.

Or they are still in your life — a parent, a sibling, someone you co-parent with, someone you are still living with or still trying to manage contact with — and you are grieving something that is happening while it is still happening. There is no clean before and after. The loss is ongoing, and you are carrying grief for something that has not fully ended.

That is the particular loneliness of grief after a relationship like this. The loss is real. The grief is real. But there is no recognized ritual for it, no social container, no casserole, no permission to fall apart in a way that other people will understand and accommodate.

This chapter is about naming what you are actually grieving — because it is probably more than you have been given credit for — and why that grief can be so disorienting to carry, whether the relationship has ended or not.

What you are mourning

Whether a relationship has ended or is still ongoing, there is not one loss inside this kind of grief. There are several, and they do not all arrive at the same time.

You are mourning the person you thought they were — or the person you hoped they could become, or the version of them that existed in better moments. The warmth, the connection, the times when it felt safe or close. You may still be mourning that version even while knowing, intellectually, that the relationship was harmful. Those two things can exist at the same time, and neither cancels the other.

This is especially complicated in family relationships. Grieving a parent means grieving not just a relationship but a version of your childhood — the one you needed and did not fully have. Grieving a sibling while maintaining family contact means grieving someone you still see at holidays, still navigate carefully around, still hope might be different. That kind of grief has no clear place to land.

You are mourning the relationship you thought you were in. Not the relationship as it was, but the one you believed you were building — the partnership, the future, the life that was supposed to come. The loss of a future that was never going to happen is still a loss. It is a strange kind of loss, because there is no object for it, no thing that was taken. Just the absence of what you expected to exist.

You are mourning the version of yourself that existed inside that relationship. The you that believed them. The you that tried so hard. The you that kept hoping. That version of you deserves some tenderness too, even now.

And you may be mourning things that accumulated over the course of the relationship — losses that earlier chapters have named, and that do not stop being losses just because they are now understood.

Why missing them doesn't mean you were wrong

One of the most confusing parts of grief after a relationship like this is that you can miss someone who hurt you. You can grieve someone whose behavior caused real damage. You can miss them and also know that being with them was not sustainable.

People sometimes interpret missing the person as evidence that they made the wrong choice, or that the relationship was not really that bad, or that they should try again. None of those follow.

What you miss is complicated. You may miss the good moments, if there were good moments. You may miss the intensity, the feeling of being at the center of someone's attention. You may miss the person who existed in the beginning, or who you believed existed. You may miss the life you built together, or the life you expected to have. You may miss something you cannot quite name — a feeling, a time, a version of yourself.

Missing them is part of grief. It does not mean they were good for you. It does not mean going back would go differently. It means you are human, and you attached to someone, and that attachment does not dissolve cleanly just because you understand what the relationship was.

The grief nobody validates

The grief you are carrying after a relationship like this often goes unacknowledged. The person is alive. Many people around you may not fully understand what happened, may not have believed you when you tried to explain, may have liked the person you are grieving. You may find yourself in the position of defending the size of your loss to people who think you should have moved on by now.

This is sometimes described in contrast to grief after a death — where there is at least a recognized ritual, a word for what you are, social permission to need time. But grief after a death is not always acknowledged either. People who grieve a complicated relationship with a parent who has died, or a person whose death brought complicated feelings, know that the social container for grief is not always offered even then. Grief after a harmful relationship can also be unseen and unnamed.

Some people describe the grief being tangled up with relief — finally out, finally safe, finally some quiet — and then feeling guilty about the grief because they know the relationship was harmful. The grief and the relief are not contradictory. Both are honest responses to an enormous loss.

There is also grief that is complicated by the fact that the person is still present. Still visible through shared children, mutual connections, or social media. Still part of your life in ways you did not choose. That grief has nowhere to fully land. There is no clear ending. And sometimes there are episodes where the person comes back, or the beginning version resurfaces briefly, and the grief has to be navigated all over again.

What it looks like in ordinary life

You call your mother to tell her something good happened. And halfway through dialing, you remember — the way you always remember, even years into it — that you will have to manage the conversation. That the good thing will get redirected toward her, or minimized, or used as an opening for something else. You call anyway. And after, you sit with the specific grief of not being able to just call your mother.

That is what grief looks like when the person is still alive and still in your life. It is not a single moment of loss. It is the accumulation of small ones — the relationship you are still reaching for, the one that keeps not being there.

When you grieve the person who existed before

Sometimes the grief is for a specific version of someone — a parent who was tender when you were small, a partner who felt safe in the beginning, a sibling who was once someone you trusted. What that relationship actually was for the other person, you cannot know. What you can know is what you experienced. And what you experienced as warmth, closeness, or love was real to you, whatever its source.

Grieving that — the connection you felt, the relationship you believed you had — while also processing what the relationship became or what you now understand it to have been, is one of the more complicated forms this grief takes. You are not just mourning the relationship. You are mourning your understanding of it, and your experience of it, and of yourself inside it.

There is no clean way through that. It sits in contradiction for a long time before it becomes something you can hold more steadily.

What grief after this kind of relationship can feel like

Grief after a harmful relationship does not always look like sadness. For some people it looks like numbness. For others, relief that then dips into emptiness. Anger that arrives when they expected sadness. Sadness that arrives when they expected to feel nothing. There is no single version of it.

Some people describe going over the relationship again and again — looking for the moment it turned, the thing they missed, the place

where it could have been different. That kind of replaying can be part of how the mind tries to process something that did not make sense while it was happening. Others do not experience it that way.

Some people notice physical effects — tiredness, difficulty concentrating, a heaviness that is hard to attribute to anything specific. Others do not. Grief does not arrive the same way for everyone, and what yours looks like is not a measure of how real it is. Those symptoms can have other causes too. If they persist, worsen, or concern you, talk to a healthcare professional.

What many people do describe, in some form, is the experience of moving through ordinary life and then finding grief arrive at an unexpected moment — something small, something that should not matter, and then suddenly it does. That unevenness is not a sign of something wrong. It is part of how loss moves through a person over time.

You are allowed to grieve this

The grief you are carrying is legitimate, even if no one around you has named it that way.

You do not need to justify the size of it. You do not need to have others agree that the loss was real in order for it to be real. You do not need to be over it on anyone else's timeline.

What you are carrying is real, and it is a lot. It makes sense that it takes time.

Grief after a relationship like this can be uneven. There may be stretches where it feels distant, and then it comes back. There may be triggers that make no sense. There may be days where it is heavier than you expected this long after. That does not, by itself, mean something is wrong with you. And if the grief is overwhelming or making it hard to get through daily life, you deserve support with that too.

The next chapter is about safety — for the people for whom this is not only emotionally difficult, but involves threats, coercive control, stalking, or other dangers, whether or not there has been physical violence. And what that changes about everything.

PART SIX: GETTING OUT AND STAYING OUT

Chapter 32 — When Safety Has to Come First

This chapter is for people for whom safety is a real and active concern — not just an emotional one. If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services (911 in the United States) as soon as you can safely do so. Do not wait to finish reading this chapter or make a safety plan before seeking emergency help.

That includes people in physically dangerous situations, but it is not limited to them. Coercive control without physical assault can restrict movement, isolate people from support, and make leaving genuinely dangerous. Dangerous family relationships — a parent, a sibling, a family member you live with or have ongoing contact with — carry their own safety considerations. So do situations where someone has left but is being stalked, harassed, or monitored.

Not everyone reading this is in one of these situations. But some of you are. And the advice that applies to most people in a difficult relationship — take your time, find support, work through it — does not apply the same way when safety is an active concern. This chapter is about naming that plainly, and about what safety planning actually looks like.

If this chapter does not describe your situation, keep reading anyway. Understanding why safety is complicated, and why "just leave" is not advice, matters for anyone who might support someone in one of these situations.

Why "just leave" is not advice

People ask why someone doesn't leave a dangerous relationship as if it is a simple oversight — as if they haven't thought of it, as if leaving were just a matter of deciding to go.

Research on intimate partner violence consistently identifies the period around leaving — the days and weeks after a person leaves or is perceived to be leaving — as a time of elevated risk for many people. This is not true in every situation, and it does not mean leaving should

not happen. It means the how and the when matter, and that planning can make a difference. Behavior that was present but managed can escalate during this period, for reasons that may include the perception that control is being lost. That is a reason to plan carefully, not a reason to stay.

There are also practical barriers. No money, no access to it. Nowhere safe to go. Children who cannot easily be moved. Fear that reporting will not be taken seriously, or will make things worse. Immigration status. A web of practical dependencies that took years to build and cannot be undone in an afternoon. The psychological weight of leaving something that was once home, leaving someone who was once the person you loved.

Understanding these barriers is not about making excuses for staying. It is about being honest that leaving is not simple, and that someone who has not left is not necessarily failing to protect themselves — they may be navigating a situation that is genuinely complicated and genuinely dangerous.

What physical danger looks like in these relationships

Physical danger in these relationships does not always look like what people picture.

It is not always hitting. It is sometimes hitting. It is also: grabbing, blocking exits, preventing sleep, using objects, threatening pets or children, destroying property in ways that make clear what could happen to you. It is behavior designed to establish that you understand what could happen — without necessarily making it happen every time.

Intimidation that stops short of contact is still intimidating. Fear that is based on past behavior is not irrational. If you are afraid, your fear is information.

Coercive control — which Chapter 19 addressed — often exists alongside or underneath physical danger. The control over money, over movement, over communication, over support systems, is often what makes leaving dangerous and what makes staying feel like the only option.

Research on intimate partner violence identifies behaviors that are associated with an increased risk of serious harm or homicide and are worth naming directly: strangulation (sometimes called choking), explicit threats to kill, access to firearms or threats with weapons, stalking, and a pattern of escalating violence. Strangulation can cause serious internal injury and death even without visible external marks. If someone has recently strangled you, seek emergency medical evaluation as soon as you can safely do so, even if you feel fine. Complications can develop later. Call emergency services for immediate danger or urgent symptoms such as trouble breathing or swallowing, a change in your voice, confusion, or weakness. These warning signs deserve particular attention, but their absence does not mean you are safe. The National Domestic Violence Hotline can help you think through your situation and connect you with people who understand what elevated-risk situations require.

Safety planning

Safety planning is not a single action. It is an ongoing process of thinking through what you would do, what you would need, and how you would protect yourself and your children in different scenarios.

A safety plan might include:

Knowing who you would call and how you would reach them — a trusted person whose number you have memorized, not just stored in a phone that might be monitored or taken.

Knowing where you would go. A shelter, a friend or family member’s home, somewhere the person does not know about or cannot easily reach.

Having essential documents accessible or copied somewhere safe — ID, children’s birth certificates, financial documents, medical records. If you cannot take originals, photos stored somewhere secure may be a starting point.

Keeping some money accessible if possible — even a small amount, stored somewhere private.

Knowing the signs that a situation is escalating, and having a plan for what to do when those signs appear.

A note on digital safety. Technology is a common avenue for monitoring and control in these situations. A shared phone plan, a shared cloud account, location sharing, parental control software, or spyware installed on a device can expose your communications, your location, and any safety planning you are doing. If you are concerned that your devices or accounts may be monitored, do your safety research on a device the other person does not have access to — a library computer, a friend's phone, or a separate device. If you need a new account, set it up and access it from a safer device, using recovery information the other person cannot access. Avoid saving passwords on shared or public computers. The National Domestic Violence Hotline has resources specifically on technology safety and can walk you through what to check. If you are reading this on a device that may be monitored, be aware that clearing your browser history can itself be noticeable and may raise suspicion. The National Domestic Violence Hotline's website has a quick-exit feature and guidance on safer browsing. Leaving the page quickly does not erase browsing history or stop monitoring. Photos of documents can also sync to shared accounts, and a vehicle or another device may reveal your location. Changing passwords, removing trackers, or turning off location sharing can alert the other person, so consider those steps with an advocate as part of your safety plan. When possible, use a device the other person does not have access to for safety-related research.

A domestic violence advocate can help you build a safety plan that reflects your specific situation. The National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233 or text START to 88788) can connect you with local resources and advocates who understand these situations and can help you think through your options without pressuring you toward any particular decision.

What safety planning can look like in practice

She kept her sister's number memorized — not in her phone, just in her head — and she kept a small amount of cash in her car, inside a book she'd had for years. She had photographed the most important documents and emailed them to an account she'd made on the library computer — one that wasn't connected to any of her other accounts, that she only accessed from there. She had not told anyone where she planned to go, because she didn't know yet. But she had started thinking about it. That is what safety planning often looks like before it looks like anything from the outside. It starts as a mental map — slow, quiet, made in pieces. Where someone keeps cash or documents and how they access an account depends on what is actually safe for them. A car, camera, or account may be monitored. The specific details here are not a checklist to follow.

Documentation

If you are in a situation where legal intervention is a possibility — or may become necessary — documentation matters.

Document incidents when it is safe to do so: date, time, what happened, any injuries, any witnesses. Photographs when relevant. Copies of threatening messages, stored somewhere the other person cannot access. Notes written at the time, in your own words, with specific details.

Documentation does not guarantee that the legal system will respond the way it should — Chapter 33 addresses that directly. But detailed, contemporaneous records give you more to work with than memory alone. The specifics of how documentation is used in legal proceedings, what to do if reports are not taken seriously, and how to navigate a system that does not always respond well to these situations are covered in the next chapter.

If you are leaving

What leaving looks like depends entirely on your circumstances. General guidance is a starting point, but no general advice can account for your specific situation, your location, the people involved, or what is actually safe for you. A trained advocate can help you think through what applies.

With that said, some things many advocates recommend: where possible, leave when the person is not home. Have a plan for where you are going and who knows you are going there. Take what you need — documents, medications, things you cannot replace — but do not let gathering belongings delay a departure if the situation is urgent.

If you are leaving with children, there may be legal considerations about what you can and cannot do, including any court orders already in place. A family law attorney who knows your jurisdiction and circumstances can advise you about those requirements. A domestic violence advocate can help with safety planning and connect you with legal resources. If the danger is immediate, do not delay seeking emergency help while trying to obtain legal advice.

If you are in immediate danger, your safety is the priority. Call emergency services (911 in the United States) as soon as you can safely do so. If you cannot safely call, text 911 where that service is available. Check in advance whether it works in your location, and do not assume it does. If a text fails to go through, use another safe way to reach emergency services. If you cannot safely call or text, get to a safer place if you can and seek help immediately. Some situations require leaving without a plan. Do not wait to finish a plan or gather belongings when you need emergency help.

When you are out but not safe

Leaving does not always end the danger. Stalking, harassment, ongoing threats, violation of court orders — these happen after people leave, sometimes for extended periods.

If you have a protective order, document violations when it is safe to do so. Reporting violations to the appropriate authority is an option, and an advocate or attorney can help you think through how to do that

safely. If you are in immediate danger, seek emergency help rather than waiting to collect evidence. A protective order is not a substitute for a safety plan. If you do not have one and believe you need one, talk to an attorney or a domestic violence advocate about what is available to you. If you have children and share custody, the safety planning for transitions and exchanges is part of the ongoing work.

The legal options available to you depend on your circumstances and your jurisdiction, and an advocate or attorney can help you understand what applies.

You are not alone in this

If you are in a situation where safety is a real concern, there are people who understand it and who can help — not with judgment, not with pressure, but with practical information and support.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline is a U.S.-based resource that operates twenty-four hours a day: 1-800-799-7233, or text START to 88788, or chat at thehotline.org. Hotline calls are generally confidential, but confidentiality has legal limits in some situations — an advocate can tell you more about what those are. Confidentiality applies to what advocates share; it does not prevent someone from monitoring the device you used to make the call or access the chat. If you are concerned about device monitoring, use a device the other person does not have access to, and see the digital safety note above.

You do not have to be in immediate danger to call. You can reach out just to understand your options or talk through your situation. If you are outside the United States, local domestic violence organizations in your country can help connect you with the resources available where you are.

You do not have to have all the answers before you reach out. That is what these resources are for.

The next chapter is about what happens when you try to use the legal system and it doesn't work the way it should — and what to do from there.

Chapter 33 — When the Legal System Doesn’t Protect You

You did everything you were supposed to do.

You reported it. You documented it. You filed the paperwork. You showed up to the hearing. You told the truth. And the system did not do what you expected it to do.

That is a particular kind of failure — not just the failure of the system, but the feeling that comes with it. The disorientation of discovering that the structures you believed were there to protect you either could not reach this situation, or chose not to.

This chapter is not a legal guide. It is not going to tell you which filings to make or what arguments to use in court. That work requires a qualified attorney who knows your specific jurisdiction and circumstances. Laws, resources, and legal definitions vary significantly by location, and anything specific in this chapter should be verified against current information for your area before you rely on it. What this chapter is for is naming what many survivors encounter when they try to use legal systems, why those systems often fall short in these situations, and what options may remain when they do.

Why the legal system often struggles with these cases

Legal proceedings consider different forms of evidence — testimony, documents, photographs, records, witness accounts. A person’s own sworn account of what happened is itself a form of evidence. Courts can and do act on testimony alone in many situations.

What is harder to establish legally is a pattern of behavior over time — coercive control, psychological abuse, intimidation, the kind of harm that is real and ongoing but does not leave a single visible mark or produce a single document. The fear you have lived inside is real. The erosion of your sense of self is real. The way someone managed and controlled your life is real. But many of these things are difficult to establish within the constraints of what legal proceedings are designed

to evaluate — a specific incident, a provable fact, evidence that meets defined standards in a particular jurisdiction.

There is also the presentation problem. The person who hurt you may present very differently to a judge, a magistrate, or a court-appointed evaluator than they do at home. The public version — calm, reasonable, cooperative — is often what the system sees. The private version is often what you lived. This is one of the central frustrations survivors describe: a system that sees a ten-minute version of a person and draws conclusions about a years-long pattern.

Laws and legal systems vary significantly by jurisdiction — what constitutes domestic abuse, what protections are available, how stalking is defined, and what coercive control means legally can all differ. Some jurisdictions have expanded their legal frameworks to address coercive control explicitly. Others have not. What is available to you depends on where you are, and an attorney who knows your jurisdiction can advise you on what applies to your situation. An advocate can help you understand the available processes and find legal assistance.

What people commonly encounter

She had the texts. She had photos. She had a written record going back two years. She brought all of it to the hearing. The judge spent less than ten minutes on it, asked a few questions, and denied the order. She walked out into the parking lot holding everything she had brought and had no idea what had just happened. *(This is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)*

There is no single way the legal system fails in these situations. What survivors describe varies by location, by the specific nature of the harm, and by which part of the system they are dealing with. It is also worth understanding that different legal processes involve different authorities and different possible outcomes.

In the United States, a police report is handled by law enforcement. Whether it results in an arrest or further investigation depends on the facts, the evidence available, the applicable law, and the policies of the jurisdiction. In some circumstances, the law requires an arrest when specified conditions are met. A criminal prosecution is a separate

process — generally handled by a prosecutor, who decides whether to pursue charges under the applicable law and procedures. An arrest does not automatically mean charges will be filed, and charges can sometimes be filed without a prior arrest. A protection order is a legal tool that can be issued through civil, criminal, or family courts depending on the jurisdiction and the circumstances — civil protection orders may be available without a parallel criminal case. Family court proceedings, including custody, have their own procedures, standards, and personnel.

Each of these involves different people, different standards of proof, and different possible remedies. What is not available in one may be available in another. An advocate or attorney can help you understand which process applies to your situation and what it can and cannot do.

Protection orders that are not enforced. A restraining order or protective order creates legal restrictions on the other person's behavior and can provide a basis for arrest if those restrictions are violated. It is a meaningful legal tool. What it cannot do is guarantee physical protection — a piece of paper does not stop someone who chooses to violate it. When a violation is reported, the response can depend on the terms of the order, applicable law, the facts and evidence, and how law enforcement and the court respond. Some violations result in arrest and consequences. Others do not, even when documented. The gap between what an order permits legally and what actually happens when it is violated can be one of the most painful failures survivors encounter.

Court proceedings that retraumatize. Custody hearings, divorce proceedings, and legal processes that require you to describe your experience in a compressed, formal context — in front of the person who caused the harm — can themselves be difficult and sometimes destabilizing. The adversarial structure of legal proceedings is not designed for the complexity of these situations.

Evaluators and guardians who reach conclusions that do not match what you have experienced. A professional who spends a few hours with both parties may not have the information or the framework to understand what years of coercive control look like, especially when one party is skilled at managing impressions.

What documentation is for

Chapter 32 covered the basics of documentation. Here is why it matters in legal proceedings specifically.

Your own account of what happened matters. Your testimony in court is itself a form of evidence. It can be supported — and in some proceedings strengthened — by documentation that exists alongside it. When it is safe to collect and keep them, detailed records written at or close to the time something occurred, screenshots and copies of communications stored somewhere the other person cannot access or delete, medical records documenting injuries or distress, and reports filed with police or other agencies are all things that may be relevant in legal proceedings. Whether they can be admitted and how much weight they carry depend on the proceeding, applicable rules, and circumstances. Before sharing or filing records that could reveal your location or other sensitive information, ask an attorney about ways to protect that information. If you are considering recording conversations, check the law with an attorney first. Do not put yourself at risk to obtain evidence; see Chapter 32 for digital safety and documentation.

The documentation does not guarantee any particular outcome. But it gives an attorney more to work with and gives you a clearer record of your own experience, which matters both legally and personally.

Working with a legal system that is imperfect

If you are navigating a legal process, there are things that may help.

An attorney who has experience with domestic violence or high-conflict family law situations is not the same as a general family law attorney. The dynamics described in this book — the presentation differences, the coercive control patterns, the difficulty of establishing what happened — are things some attorneys know well and others do not. If possible, seek out someone with specific experience in these situations. If cost is a barrier, local legal aid organizations, law school clinics, and domestic violence organizations sometimes offer low-cost or no-cost legal assistance. The National Domestic Violence Hotline can help connect you with legal resources in your area, and

WomensLaw.org provides state-specific legal information and can help you find local assistance.

Domestic violence advocates are different from attorneys. They can often accompany you to hearings, help you understand what is happening, and navigate the process alongside you, depending on local rules and available services. An advocate is a support and a guide, not automatically a legal representative. Unless separately qualified and authorized to provide legal advice or representation, an advocate cannot take the place of an attorney for those services.

If you have an open case and are unsure of its status, you can contact the agency or court that handled your report or filing directly to ask. Have the case number if you have one, and the name of any officer, prosecutor, or court involved.

If a protective order is being violated, documenting the violations is generally advisable when it is safe to do so. Reporting violations to the responsible agency — whether law enforcement, the court, or another authority depending on the type of order and jurisdiction — is an option, though the response is not guaranteed. Some reports result in action. Others do not. The existence of a report does not automatically create a record that will be usable in future proceedings; how reports are retained, accessed, and treated varies. If your situation involves ongoing violations, an attorney or advocate can help you understand the available reporting process, and an attorney can advise you on legal follow-up. If you or your children are in immediate danger, contact emergency services (911 in the United States) as soon as you can safely do so. Do not wait to collect evidence. If you suspect child abuse or neglect, report it promptly to the appropriate local authority, as discussed in Chapter 30.

If evaluators reach conclusions that seem wrong, an attorney may be able to challenge the methodology or request additional evaluation. This is expensive and not always successful, but it is sometimes possible.

When the system does not reach

Sometimes the legal system will not give you what you need. The order is not issued. The case is not prosecuted. The custody arrangement does not protect you or your children the way you believed it would.

That is a real outcome. It happens to real people. It does not, by itself, mean that you failed, that what happened was not serious enough, or that more documentation would have changed the outcome. It is a reminder that these systems have limits, and that survivors can be left without the protection they need.

When the formal system does not reach, other forms of support and protection become more important — safety planning, advocates, community support, documentation that may be useful in future proceedings, and legal consultation about what other options exist. Some situations that were not actionable at one point become actionable as circumstances change.

You are not the last line of defense

Navigating a legal system that is not working the way it should is exhausting on top of everything else you are already carrying. It can feel like, in addition to surviving the relationship, you are now also responsible for making a system do its job.

You are not. The system's failures are not your failures. What you can do is build the most accurate record you can when it is safe to do so, get qualified legal advice about what options exist for your situation, connect with advocates who know these systems well, and make the choices that are available to you — not the ones that should be available but are not.

That is the most honest thing that can be said about this: some of the protection that should exist does not. That is a failure of the systems, not of the people they were supposed to protect.

The next chapter is about the decision to leave — what it actually looks and feels like when it happens, and what it means to be ready.

Chapter 34 — The Decision to Leave

It usually doesn’t look like a decision.

She was making coffee when she realized she was calculating whether the sound of the cabinet would wake him up. Measuring the noise of a spoon. Mapping the morning around his moods before he was even awake. It was nothing — a Tuesday, an ordinary kitchen, a thing she had done a hundred times. But something about that morning, she could not stop noticing what she was doing.

(This is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)

There is not often a moment where everything becomes clear and you choose, with clean certainty, to go. More often, the leaving starts long before it happens — a small internal shift, a knowing that you have been carrying for a while, a line that gets crossed that is somehow different from the lines that were crossed before it.

For some people it is a specific moment. For others it is an accumulation. For some, it is simply the exhaustion — a point where continuing takes more than you have left. And for some, the decision is made for them, when circumstances change in ways that make staying impossible.

There is no right way for this to happen. This chapter is about what it actually looks like, not what it is supposed to look like.

What “ready” actually means

People talk about being ready to leave as if readiness is a state you reach, a destination you arrive at after enough thinking, enough suffering, enough evidence. It is usually not like that.

Readiness does not have to mean certainty. For some people, it is a point where the cost of staying has finally outweighed — in some internal accounting you may not fully be able to explain — whatever has been keeping them there. It is not the same as being unafraid. It is not the same as knowing what comes next. It is not the same as being done grieving, or done loving them, or done hoping that something might be different.

Feeling ready to leave and being able to leave are also not the same thing. Someone may feel certain they want out and still face real obstacles — no safe place to go, shared children, financial dependence, fear of what the other person will do when they find out. Emotional readiness is one piece. Practical safety planning is another. Both matter, and they do not always arrive at the same time.

You can leave before you feel ready. Many people do. Some describe feeling ready only after the fact — only after they were already out did they realize they had been ready for a long time.

What readiness is not: permission from someone else. Enough bad things having happened. A specific level of suffering that justifies leaving. A guarantee that the next thing will be better.

Why the threshold is different for everyone

People leave at different points, and the difference is not about strength or intelligence or how much they loved themselves. It is about circumstances, about what is possible, about what else is at stake, about the particular combination of factors that is different for every person.

Someone with children may stay longer because leaving means disrupting them, or because the co-parenting situation after leaving looks, from where they are standing, worse than the current one. Someone without financial independence may not have a clear path out. Someone whose family and friends have been pulled to the other side may have nowhere obvious to go. Someone who has been told so many times that they are overreacting may not fully trust their own read on how bad it actually is.

None of those are failures. They are circumstances, and they are specific to each person.

The moment, or the accumulation

For some people, leaving is precipitated by a specific event — something that happens that is different enough from everything before it that it creates a before and after. It might be something the person did. It might be something a child saw. It might be something someone outside the relationship said that landed differently than it had before. It might be something small that somehow made it finally clear.

For others, there is no single moment. There is a long gradual shift — the slow realization that this is not going to change, that they have already tried everything that could be tried, that the relationship they were waiting for is not coming. The decision, when it arrives, feels less like a decision and more like an acceptance.

Both are real. Neither is more valid. And it is worth saying that the absence of a dramatic moment — a final incident that explains it — does not mean the decision was wrong or premature. Sometimes clarity comes from pattern recognition rather than crisis.

Going back

Many people leave more than once before they leave for the last time.

That is not weakness, and it is not a reason to feel shame about the attempts that did not hold. People return for many different reasons — because of children, because of housing, because of financial dependence, because of genuine fear about what happens if they don't, because of grief and attachment that do not simply switch off. Sometimes the relationship pulls. Sometimes circumstances push back. Often it is both.

Returning is part of the experience for many survivors, not an exception to it. The number of times someone left and returned before finally staying gone does not change what the relationship was or what it did to them.

After the decision

The period after deciding to leave — or after leaving — is often not what people expect.

Relief is real, for many people. But so is disorientation. So is grief. So is the strange experience of ordinary life going on around you while you are in the middle of something enormous. So is the flood of practical problems: where you live, how you pay for things, what happens with shared children, what you tell people, what you do with the objects and the shared history and the person who is still there even after you are not.

The decision to leave is the beginning of a process, not the end of one. That is worth knowing going in, so that the difficulty of what comes after does not get mistaken for evidence that the decision was wrong.

There is no timeline

You may still be in the relationship. You may be thinking about leaving and not there yet. You may have left and gone back. You may be reading this years after you left, still working through what happened.

This book is not here to tell you when that should be, or to suggest that if you have not left yet, you are failing to protect yourself. Chapter 25 covered the many real reasons people stay. Those reasons do not expire. And if something in your situation has shifted — if you are thinking about next steps, or starting to plan — Chapter 32 on safety planning is there for that too.

What is true is that you are allowed to leave. You are allowed to decide that something is harming you and that you do not want to continue in it. You do not need a final incident. You do not need permission. You do not need to be certain about what comes next.

How you go — the timing, the planning, the steps that keep you and your children as safe as possible — may be a more complicated question. Custody arrangements, legal orders, safety plans, where you will stay: those are real logistics that affect how separation happens, and they are worth taking seriously. The right to leave and the path out of a specific situation are two different things. Both deserve attention. In an abusive relationship, the period around leaving and afterward can carry increased danger. A domestic violence advocate can help you plan around your specific circumstances, including after you leave. If you or your children are in immediate danger, contact emergency services (911 in the United States) as soon as you can safely do so. Do not wait to finish a safety plan or obtain legal advice before seeking emergency help.

You are allowed to go.

The next chapter is about no contact and low contact — what those terms actually mean, and what they look like in practice for different situations.

Chapter 35 — No Contact and Low Contact: What They Actually Mean

Her phone was on the counter. She had not blocked his number yet. She was not sure she was allowed to — not in the sense that anyone had told her she couldn't, but in the sense that it felt like a declaration, something final that she was not ready to make official. So the number stayed there. And every time the phone lit up with something that wasn't him, she felt a small release that she couldn't quite name.

(This is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)

No contact is one of those phrases that sounds simple until you are the person trying to do it.

What no contact actually is

No contact means exactly what it sounds like: no communication, in either direction, with the person you are ending or have ended the relationship with. No calls. No texts. No emails. No social media. No responding to messages sent through other people. No checking their profiles. No reaching out to mutual friends to find out how they are doing. No contact means no contact.

A few things are worth knowing before implementing it. First, when it is safe and feasible to do so, preserve any threatening or harassing messages before blocking someone — those messages may be needed for legal proceedings. If blocking someone immediately is what your safety requires, do that first. Evidence preservation matters, but not more than immediate protection. Second, be aware that blocking someone can sometimes escalate behavior in people who are prone to harassment or stalking. The National Domestic Violence Hotline specifically addresses this risk and can help you think through what approach is safest in your specific situation before you act. Third, if there is any concern that your phone or devices may be monitored — shared accounts, location sharing, or software the other person may have installed — do your safety planning on a device they do not have access to. The same guidance from Chapter 32 applies here: a device

that may be monitored is not a safe device for safety-related planning, regardless of what browser settings you use.

The rationale for no contact is straightforward. Many of the patterns that made the relationship harmful do not stop when the relationship ends. The pulls — toward explaining yourself, toward responding to something that feels urgent, toward the hope that one more conversation might finally produce the understanding you were waiting for — remain active after physical separation. No contact is not primarily about the other person. It is about limiting the number of access points through which those pulls can operate.

No contact is not punishment. It is not a statement about whether the other person is irredeemably terrible. For many people, it is simply the clearest way to create the space needed to stabilize — to stop being activated by an ongoing stream of contact, to begin recognizing their own thoughts and feelings without the other person's voice running underneath.

When no contact is not possible

There are situations where no contact, as a complete and total severing, is not a realistic option.

Shared children are one example. Co-parenting situations often require some ongoing communication, but that does not necessarily mean direct communication with the other person. Depending on what custody orders require, what a family law attorney recommends, and what the safety situation looks like, communication may happen through court-approved co-parenting platforms that can record and timestamp exchanges, through attorneys, or through another designated intermediary. Some custody arrangements are specifically structured to minimize or eliminate direct contact. What is possible depends on what is legally ordered and what is safe — not on an assumption that sharing children means you must communicate directly.

Workplace situations are another. If you work with this person, or in an industry where you will inevitably be at the same events or in the same rooms, complete no contact may not be possible either.

Family relationships add a different layer. If the person is a parent, sibling, or other family member, the social and practical entanglement can be significant. Family events, shared relatives, and expectations from other people in the family can make total no contact difficult to sustain even when it is what you want. What is possible in those situations — and what level of contact feels manageable without being harmful — varies considerably by person and circumstance.

The point is not that no contact is the only valid response, or that anything less than total severing is a failure. The point is that creating distance — in whatever form is actually available to you — can serve a real function during the period after leaving.

What low contact is

Low contact means reducing the frequency, depth, and emotional charge of contact — not eliminating it entirely, but containing it.

For people who co-parent, low contact might look like: communicating only in writing, keeping exchanges focused on logistics, not responding to anything that is not logistically necessary, and declining to engage with anything that feels designed to pull you into a conflict or a conversation about the past. It is about scope and tone, not just quantity. What that looks like has to fit any court orders, your children's needs, and what is safe in your situation. If there is ongoing abuse, stalking, or a concern about a child's safety, get individualized safety and legal guidance rather than relying on low contact alone. See Chapter 30.

Low contact is not "talking less but otherwise the same as before." It is a different kind of contact — transactional where it needs to be transactional, brief where possible, without warmth that is not genuine, without explanations of your choices that you do not owe, and without the ongoing management of someone else's feelings that characterized the relationship.

This is harder than it sounds. When someone is accustomed to having access to you — to your emotional responses, to your explanations, to your effort to smooth things over — a shift to minimal, transactional communication will often produce a reaction. That reaction is not evidence that low contact is wrong. It is also not evidence that it is

working, in the sense of being safe. A reaction can range from frustration to harassment to escalation, and it needs to be assessed on its own terms. If contact or behavior increases in ways that feel threatening, that is a safety concern, not a sign that the strategy is succeeding. Trust your assessment of what is actually happening, and get support if you need it.

The gray rock method

Gray rock is a name some people use for a specific way of engaging when contact cannot be avoided — in a custody exchange, in a workplace meeting, in a family event where you will both be present.

The idea is to become, as much as possible, unremarkable. Not dramatic, not reactive, not interesting. Short answers. No personal information. No emotional content. No engagement with provocations. No big reactions to things designed to get a big reaction. Just flat, unremarkable, as-boring-as-a-gray-rock responses to whatever you are asked or told.

The goal is not to be rude. It is to reduce the emotional energy that makes interactions feel rewarding to continue — the reactions, the information, the engagement that extends contact.

Gray rock is a communication tactic, not a proven safety strategy. It is not appropriate for every situation, and in some cases it can increase tension or trigger an escalating response. Someone who is already prone to harassment or stalking behavior may react to flat, unresponsive engagement in ways that make things worse rather than better. The approach also does not address physical safety in any direct way. If you are considering gray rock in a situation where you have concerns about your safety, it is worth talking through your specific circumstances with a domestic violence advocate before using it. Some people find it useful for lower-stakes obligatory contact — a brief workplace interaction, for example, when that is safe. A custody exchange is not necessarily low-risk just because it takes place in public. Follow the safety and legal guidance in Chapter 30. It is one communication option, not a plan.

The practical reality of both

No contact and low contact both require something that is not often talked about directly: that you stop performing.

In a relationship defined by walking on eggshells, most people become very good at managing interactions — softening their words, anticipating reactions, explaining themselves carefully, monitoring the temperature of every exchange. That management is exhausting and often unconscious by the time you leave. It has become automatic.

Low contact and no contact are, among other things, the removal of that management job. You are no longer responsible for making interactions go smoothly. You are not responsible for the other person's response to a brief, transactional message. You are not responsible for their feelings about your communication choices.

This can feel strange. It can feel cold, or unkind, or like you are doing something wrong. The discomfort is worth noticing. It does not necessarily mean you are doing something wrong. It may mean you have been managing someone else's reactions for so long that not doing it feels like a violation.

What happens to your own side of it

No contact and low contact are often talked about in terms of what they do to the other person's access to you. Less often discussed is what they do for you.

When contact is ongoing — when you are still receiving messages, still being pulled into explanations, still managing someone else's anger or grief about your choices — the break is never complete. Part of your mental space stays occupied by the most recent thing they said, or by anticipating the next thing. That occupation is real, even when you do not consciously notice it.

Reducing contact can ease that occupation. It may not eliminate it immediately — the thoughts, the replays, the wondering what they are doing now often continue for a long time after contact stops. For many people, over time, the absence of incoming material allows the internal noise to begin to settle. That is not guaranteed, and it does not happen

on a predictable timeline. Other support — therapy, trusted people, time — tends to matter alongside the reduction in contact itself.

There is also sometimes a shift in perception when the ongoing dynamic stops. When you are no longer receiving a steady stream of someone else's version of who you are and what is true, your own perceptions can have more room. That is not always comfortable. What emerges can be disorienting or painful. But it tends to be more yours.

When contact comes anyway

Sometimes the other person reaches out despite whatever limits you have put in place. Sometimes a message comes through a family member, or arrives in a form you did not think to block. Sometimes they show up somewhere you did not expect.

What to do with those moments — how to respond or not respond, how to hold a limit when someone is pushing against it — is its own subject. Chapter 36 addresses the specific patterns that often show up when someone who has not accepted the ending makes contact.

The short version for now: in most cases, you do not owe a response to contact that is unwanted or outside what you have agreed to. That said, there are real exceptions. Court orders may require certain responses. Child-related emergencies may require communication. Legal or financial matters with binding timelines may require action. If you are unsure whether a specific message requires a response, an attorney can advise you on your actual legal obligations, and a domestic violence advocate can help you think through safety and support options. What you do not owe is emotional engagement, explanation, or access beyond what any legal or custody arrangement specifically requires. Someone pushing past a limit you have set is not evidence that you failed to hold it. It is a reason to document the contact if it is safe to do so and, if necessary, to get support. If they show up or make threats and you or your children are in immediate danger, contact emergency services (911 in the United States) as soon as you can safely do so. Do not wait to collect evidence. If a child needs protection, follow the guidance in Chapter 30.

Different situations, different tools

No contact and low contact are not interchangeable, and what is possible depends entirely on the specifics of your situation. If there are children, there are likely legal agreements that govern some of what is possible. If there are threats or a history of violence, there may be legal orders in place that affect contact from their side. If the relationship is a family one rather than a romantic partnership, the social pressures around cutting off contact look different.

The thing these tools share is the same underlying principle: you get to decide how much access someone has to you, to your emotional responses, to your time, and to your personal information. That is true regardless of what they think about that decision, and regardless of how they respond to it.

The next chapter is about a specific pattern that many people encounter after leaving: contact that arrives after the relationship has ended, often in forms that are designed to pull you back in. It has a name.

Chapter 36 — The Hoover: When They Come Back

(The following is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)

Three months after she left, he sent a text that said: *I've been doing a lot of thinking. I know I hurt you. I just want you to know I'm getting help.*

She read it four times. She showed it to her friend, who said "don't respond." She typed and deleted a response anyway. She did not send it. But she thought about it for two weeks.

It has a name. The hoover — named after the vacuum, for the way it can pull you back — is an informal term, not a clinical diagnosis. Some therapists and survivors use it to describe a pattern of re-contact that often follows a separation: attempts to reconnect that arrive in forms harder to dismiss than a direct request to come back.

Not every attempt to reach out after a breakup is a hoover. Some people reach out from genuine grief, genuine remorse, or genuine confusion about what happened. The term is useful not as a verdict about the other person's intentions, but as a framework for recognizing what different forms of post-separation contact can feel like to receive — and why some of them are harder to hold a limit against than others.

This chapter is about recognizing what is happening when it comes, not about telling you what it means about the person sending it.

Why it happens

What drives someone to reach out after a relationship has ended varies, and you usually cannot determine it from the outside. Sometimes the contact is deliberate and strategic. Sometimes it is not. Sometimes it is a mix. The intent behind a message does not always change how it lands or what it asks of you.

What is more knowable is the pattern itself. When a relationship ends, some people continue to reach out — sometimes with increasing frequency or intensity. The pattern described in this chapter is about

what that contact tends to look like, and why certain forms of it are harder to hold a limit against than a direct request would be.

What it looks like

Post-separation contact does not always look like a plea to return. It can take many forms, and some of them are easy to miss as what they are. The following are common examples — not a checklist or a predictable sequence.

The crisis. An emergency surfaces that appears to require your involvement — their health, a shared obligation, something only you can help with. The urgency creates pressure to respond when you otherwise would not. Sometimes these are real. Sometimes they are exaggerated or manufactured. The difficulty is that you usually cannot immediately know which one it is — and some genuine emergencies do require a response, particularly ones involving shared children, a time-sensitive legal matter, or a safety concern. Those situations are worth taking seriously on their own terms, separate from the question of whether contact is otherwise appropriate. That does not mean you have to intervene personally. See the emergency guidance later in this chapter.

The changed person. This is the form in the opening scene above. They have realized something. They are getting help. They understand now what they did not understand before. The apology is real this time. They want a chance to show you. This version is emotionally powerful because it speaks directly to the hope that most people carry — that the relationship they wanted was possible, that this person could become that version of themselves.

It is worth holding two things at once here. Change is genuinely possible in people. And a statement about getting help or understanding what went wrong is not evidence of sustained change — it is a statement. Genuine accountability tends to show up in behavior over time, not in a message sent at the moment someone realizes you are gone. That does not mean the statement is necessarily false. It means it cannot be evaluated from the outside on the basis of the message alone, and that the timing is worth noticing.

The indirect reach. They reach out through someone else — a mutual friend, a family member, a child. Sometimes this person is aware they are being used as a conduit. Sometimes they are not. The message arrives in a form that feels harder to refuse because it is not directly from the person you have put a limit on.

The small contact. A like on something you posted. A brief text about something neutral — a shared pet, something that reminded them of you, happy birthday. Contact that feels too minor to respond to with the kind of boundary conversation you would need to have if you acknowledged it. It can be hard to know what to do with something this small, in part because it does not make its purpose clear.

The escalation. When smaller contacts do not produce a response, the attempts may intensify — more messages, messages through additional people, showing up somewhere. When this happens, it is no longer just a question of emotional boundaries. It may be harassment or stalking behavior, and it deserves to be treated as such, not as a communication problem to be managed.

Why it is hard to hold the line

It is worth being direct about why post-separation contact is hard to hold a limit against. It is not because you are weak or foolish. It is because the person reaching out is not a stranger.

They know your history. They know what you have hoped for. They know what a message like “I’m getting help” means to you, because you spent years hoping it would be true. Whether or not the contact is deliberate in its targeting, it lands in a way that a stranger’s words would not — because of everything that is already there.

There is also the fact that the attachment does not end when the relationship does. The feelings — the love, the longing, the grief — are still there. Contact from this person arrives into that existing emotional landscape, not a clean one. It finds what is already present.

And the guilt that many people carry after leaving — about the disruption, about the other person’s pain, about their own uncertainty — can be directly activated by this kind of contact. The guilt is real.

What it is pointing at, and whether it is reliable information about what you should do, is worth examining separately from the feeling itself.

What a response does

This is the part that is worth understanding clearly, not as a rule to follow but as information — and it is not a simple answer.

There is a commonly shared idea that any response to unwanted contact — even one that says “please stop” — signals that contact produces results, and therefore encourages more contact. That may be true in some situations. It is not a reliable general principle, and it is worth being cautious about applying it too broadly. What a response does depends on the specific person, the specific situation, and many factors you may not be able to assess from the outside.

What matters more than finding a universal rule is being deliberate about what you actually need. Some contacts require a response — legal obligations, child-related matters, genuine emergencies. Others do not. The decision about whether and how to respond is yours to make based on your circumstances, not on a general principle about what responses signal.

If contact is unwanted, escalating, or includes harassment or threats, the more important questions are safety, documentation, and legal protection. Keep records of contact that concerns you if it is safe to do so. If behavior is escalating in ways that feel threatening, that is a safety situation, not a communication problem. Contact does not become your responsibility to manage correctly in order to prevent someone else from harassing you. If you or your children are in immediate danger, contact emergency services (911 in the United States) as soon as you can safely do so. Do not wait to collect evidence. If you are dealing with ongoing unwanted contact, a domestic violence advocate can help with safety planning, and an attorney familiar with your situation can advise you about legal options. See Chapters 32 and 33.

When it triggers going back

For some people, a hoover is not just an attempt at contact — it results in returning to the relationship. That is part of why Chapter 34 discussed returning without framing it as failure. Some of the same dynamics that made the relationship difficult to leave can also make that contact harder to resist. Returning can also involve safety concerns, practical pressures, or other circumstances.

If you have gone back after this kind of contact and are reading this, the chapter stands. You are not in a different category of person. You are in a situation that many people recognize, and navigating it is genuinely hard.

A note on permanence

Not every person who has left these relationships will experience this kind of contact. Some relationships end without further attempts to reconnect. Some people accept the ending. The pattern described in this chapter is something many survivors recognize, but it is not universal.

It is also worth noting that for people in ongoing co-parenting situations, or family relationships that cannot be fully ended, some level of continued communication may be necessary. That does not always mean direct contact with the other person. The question in those situations is what contact is actually required, what is safe, and whether the patterns in this chapter are showing up within it. See Chapters 30 and 35.

It is also worth saying that not all post-separation contact is strategic. Some of it may come from grief, confusion, or not knowing what else to do. That does not mean the contact is safe to respond to, or that the ending was wrong, or that you owe them comfort during your own process. It is simply worth holding alongside the other truths here.

What to do with the message, when it comes

For most contact, you do not have to decide immediately. If something arrives and you are not sure what to do, you do not have to respond in the moment. You can wait. You can talk to someone you trust first. You can sit with what it brought up before you act.

There are exceptions. If a message involves what appears to be an immediate safety emergency, a threat of self-harm, something urgent involving a shared child, or a time-sensitive legal matter, take it seriously. If someone appears to be in immediate danger, contact emergency services (911 in the United States) as soon as you can safely do so. If someone threatens suicide or self-harm and you are unsure what to do, you can call or text 988 in the United States for crisis guidance, or use a local crisis service elsewhere. You do not have to decide whether a threat is genuine before seeking help, and you do not have to go to the person or put yourself in danger to respond. For other urgent child-related or legal matters, a child's other caregiver or an attorney may be the right first contact, depending on the situation and any court orders. If a child needs protection, follow the guidance in Chapter 30.

Some people find it helpful to have decided in advance — to have thought through what they will and will not respond to, so that the in-the-moment emotional response does not have to be the whole of the decision. Others find that kind of planning too rigid for how their situation works. Either approach is fine.

When the contact is not a safety emergency, one thing that can be worth doing is noticing what it brought up. The hope. The guilt. The grief. The old pull. That noticing is information about where you still are in the process — not as evidence that you made the wrong choice, but as a signal about what still needs attention.

The next chapter is about the body — what extended stress and fear do physically, and what recovery looks like when it starts there.

PART SEVEN: COMING BACK TO YOURSELF

Chapter 37 — Healing Your Body First

She had been out for six months when she noticed she was still flinching. Not at anything in particular. At doors closing. At a certain tone of voice. At her own phone screen lighting up at night. She was safe, and her body had not gotten the message.

(This is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)

Understanding what sustained stress does to the body matters, because a great deal of recovery from these situations happens not only through insight but through the body beginning, slowly, to come out of the state it has been in. Cognitive understanding and physical recovery do not always happen at the same pace — and knowing why can make the experience less confusing.

What sustained stress does physically

When the nervous system perceives a threat, it can activate a response: heart rate may increase, breathing changes, muscles tense, attention shifts toward danger. These are some of the survival responses — often described as fight, flight, or freeze. They can happen automatically, without a conscious decision. It is the body doing what it is designed to do.

In a situation of ongoing threat or unpredictability, the effects of that response can linger or keep returning. Some people remain on alert — scanning for danger, primed to react, unable to fully settle — while others feel numb or move between different responses. Over time, prolonged stress can contribute to a range of physical experiences: difficulty relaxing even in objectively safe moments, exhaustion that sleep does not fix, disrupted sleep, headaches, muscle tension, digestive problems, or a kind of emotional flatness that set in at some point and did not lift.

These experiences are not signs of weakness or psychological fragility. They can be associated with what prolonged stress does to the body. That said, physical symptoms always deserve proper medical attention

— new or persistent symptoms should be evaluated by a doctor, not assumed to be caused by stress or trauma alone. Many conditions that can produce these symptoms are treatable, and a medical evaluation is part of taking your physical health seriously.

Research on traumatic stress describes how physical and emotional reactions can persist even when someone understands what happened. Clinicians such as Peter Levine and Bessel van der Kolk have emphasized the physical dimension of traumatic stress, though the evidence for specific body-oriented approaches varies. Insight into what happened does not automatically produce relief. Understanding something cognitively and having your body respond differently are two different things, and they do not always happen at the same pace.

The flinch

Many survivors describe some version of the flinch: a startle response, a physical reaction to something that resembles — in sound, in tone, in shape — something that used to mean danger.

A car door slamming. A particular register of voice. Footsteps in the hall. A message notification. These can produce a physical fear response even when the person is objectively safe and consciously knows it.

This is not irrational. A reminder of past danger can trigger a response even when you are safe in the present — the nervous system reacting to something associated with threat. But not every sign of danger is old information. If there is ongoing abuse, stalking, or a new threat, take that seriously and use the safety guidance in Chapter 32.

For some people, over time, the startle response does soften — particularly with support and when conditions allow for greater safety and stability. For others it remains more persistent and may benefit from working with a trauma-informed therapist. The timeline varies considerably, and the absence of improvement is not evidence that nothing can help.

What the body needs to begin settling

This is not a medical treatment plan, and it is not a substitute for medical care or working with a qualified therapist, particularly one trained in trauma. What follows is a description of things that may help the body begin settling. Healing your body first is about giving your physical needs attention, not a rule that your body has to settle before you can start therapy or any other part of recovery.

Safety. Increased safety tends to support nervous system regulation. This sounds obvious, but it matters: ongoing threat makes it harder for the body to settle, and the removal of active danger — when it is possible — tends to support the other things in this section. That said, people can begin accessing support and experiencing meaningful improvement even before their situation is fully resolved. Safety is a support condition, not an all-or-nothing prerequisite.

Sleep. Sleep plays an important role in physical and emotional health. Stress can disrupt sleep, and poor sleep can make stress harder to manage. For many people coming out of these situations, sleep is poor — intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance at night, difficulty fully relaxing. Addressing sleep is not a minor quality-of-life issue. It is part of recovery. Sleep habits may help, but persistent sleep problems deserve assessment. Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is an established first-line treatment for chronic insomnia.

Movement. Physical activity is associated with reduced stress and improved mood, and some people find it helpful during recovery. For people who are able to engage in physical activity, movement — in whatever form works for them, whether walking, swimming, dancing, stretching, or something else — may be worth including. This is not a prescription for exercise as a cure, and it is not available to everyone in the same way. Physical limitations, pain, disability, and other factors affect what is accessible. The point is that movement, where it is possible and comfortable, is worth including rather than setting aside.

Breath. Slow, comfortable breathing may help some people relax. A longer exhale is one option, but it is not necessary. Some people find this useful. Others find breath-focused exercises uncomfortable, particularly those with a trauma history around breathing or physical

control. If focused breathing feels distressing rather than calming, that is useful information — it does not mean you are doing it wrong, and you can stop the exercise or try something else. It is worth mentioning to a therapist if you are working with one.

Predictability and routine. Many people find that having some structure and predictability in their days supports a sense of stability during recovery. Routine — the same rhythms, the same small structure to the day — can be grounding, particularly in a period of significant change. This is part of why the early period after leaving, which is often chaotic and uncertain, can feel destabilizing even when it is safer than what came before.

Connection. Research links supportive relationships with better mental health after trauma. Isolation and a lack of support can make recovery harder for some people. This is not a reason to push yourself into social situations that feel overwhelming. It is a reason that safe, calm connection — with a trusted friend, a family member, a therapist, a support group — is worth seeking out when it is available to you.

What therapists who work with trauma focus on

For people who have access to therapy and want to work specifically on the effects of traumatic stress, there are several approaches designed for this. They are not all the same, and their evidence bases differ.

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), and Prolonged Exposure (PE) are among the approaches with the strongest research support for treating PTSD. EMDR involves processing traumatic memories while using guided eye movements or other forms of bilateral stimulation. It is not a purely body-focused approach. CPT focuses on how the traumatic experience has affected beliefs about oneself and the world. PE helps people gradually approach trauma memories and safe situations they have been avoiding, with the guidance of a trained therapist.

Somatic Experiencing is a body-oriented approach that focuses on physical sensations associated with traumatic stress. Some people find it very useful. Early research is promising, but evidence is still limited, and the 2023 VA/DoD PTSD guideline found insufficient evidence to recommend for or against Somatic Experiencing as a treatment for

PTSD. That is worth knowing when making decisions about treatment. It is not a reason to dismiss it, but it is a reason to look for a qualified practitioner and to track whether it is helping.

There are other trauma-focused approaches beyond those described here. If you are working with a therapist and trauma is part of what you are addressing, it is reasonable to ask what approach they use and what the evidence for it looks like in situations like yours. These are not the only valid forms of therapy, and they are not available to everyone. A qualified clinician can help you understand which options fit your needs, including treatment that does not focus directly on trauma. The trauma-focused approaches are worth knowing about if you are looking for care that specifically addresses traumatic stress.

The gap between knowing and feeling

One of the most disorienting aspects of recovery for many people is the gap between what they know and what they feel. They know they are safe. They feel afraid. They know the relationship is over. They feel the pull toward it. They know the other person's behavior was harmful. They feel guilty about leaving.

This gap is not a sign that someone is confused or has not really understood what happened. It reflects that insight and physical recovery can happen on different timelines. Many people find that the feelings shift over time — through accumulated experience of safety, through time, through ongoing support. For some people that process is longer or requires continued professional help. The gap does not mean the understanding was wrong or that recovery is not happening.

That gap is frustrating. For many people, it does narrow over time — not in a straight line, and not on a predictable schedule. Some people need ongoing support to manage it. That is not a failure; it is part of how recovery works for some situations.

What this looks like in practice

Recovery at the level of the body is usually not dramatic. It tends to be small and cumulative. For some people it looks like sleeping through the night for the first time in a long time. For some it is a moment of genuine calm — not forced, not performed — that is unfamiliar enough to be noticeable. For some it is realizing they went a whole hour without thinking about what happened. These are examples, not a checklist — recovery looks different for different people.

None of these are endpoints. For many people, they do accumulate over time into something that feels meaningfully different from where they started. Recovery looks different for different people, and some situations require ongoing care rather than a point of arrival. Both are real, and neither is a reflection of how much effort someone put in.

The next chapter is about forgiveness — a concept that is frequently misunderstood and sometimes used in ways that ask too much of survivors. What it actually means, what it does not require, and what it might offer.

Chapter 38 — Forgiveness: Not for Them. For You.

(The following is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)

Someone told her she needed to forgive him. She was still sleeping on a friend's couch. She had not yet filed the paperwork. She had not yet told her mother the full story.

Forgive him, the person said. For your own sake. You'll carry it with you forever if you don't.

She smiled and said nothing. She did not feel ready to explain that what she was carrying right now was herself, and that was enough.

Forgiveness is one of the most misused concepts in the context of recovery from harmful relationships — whether those relationships are romantic, familial, or otherwise. It is offered as advice, as spiritual guidance, as the destination that proves you have truly healed. It is used, sometimes, as pressure — a way of suggesting that the person who cannot yet forgive is the one with the problem.

This chapter is about what forgiveness actually is, what it is not, and what it might offer — on your own terms, in your own time, if and when it comes.

What forgiveness is not

Forgiveness does not mean that what happened was acceptable.

It does not mean the other person has changed, or earned it, or deserves a second chance. It does not require reconciliation. It does not require telling the other person anything. It does not require that you no longer feel hurt, or that you pretend the harm did not occur. It does not mean you must maintain a relationship, speak kindly about the person, or welcome them back into your life.

Forgiveness, in the sense that is actually useful here, has nothing to do with the other person's worthiness.

It also does not need to be permanent or complete. Some people forgive in waves — feeling it on a Tuesday, not feeling it at all on a Thursday. Some people arrive at something like forgiveness for some

parts of the experience and not others. That is not a failure of the process. It is what the process looks like for many people.

What forgiveness might actually be

One way some people think about forgiveness is as a shift in their own relationship to what happened — no longer organized primarily around it, no longer requiring the past to have been different as a precondition for the present. In this framing, it is less about the other person than about what you are carrying and whether you want to keep carrying it.

That is one framing. It is not the only one, and it is not a requirement.

It is also worth separating forgiveness from the things it is sometimes conflated with. Moving forward is not the same as forgiving. Accepting that something happened is not the same as forgiving the person who did it. Reducing the amount of mental space the experience occupies is not forgiveness — it can happen without it. These are related things that sometimes travel together, but they do not require each other.

Some people find the word forgiveness useful. Others find it carries too much association with approval, erasure, or spiritual obligation to be a helpful frame for what they are actually trying to do. They use other words — letting go, moving on, accepting the reality of what happened — and those may fit better. What matters is not the word. What matters is what actually serves you.

What you are not required to do

You are not required to forgive.

This deserves to be said plainly, because a great deal of cultural and religious messaging suggests otherwise. The idea that forgiveness is necessary for healing — that you cannot truly recover without it, that carrying unforgiveness is what keeps you stuck — is a claim, not a fact. Many people recover without ever arriving at anything they would call forgiveness. Many people find that the anger, the grief, and the sense of injustice are appropriate responses to what happened, and that processing them matters more than resolving them into forgiveness.

You are not required to forgive on anyone else's timeline. You are not required to forgive before you are ready, or to perform forgiveness when you do not feel it. You are not required to forgive at all.

Many people do find, over time, a way of living in which what happened is part of the story but not the whole of it. That can happen with or without forgiveness. Some people describe building a full life — work, relationships, genuine pleasure in ordinary things — while still holding real anger about what was done to them. That is not a failure of healing. It is one version of how healing looks.

It is worth knowing both are possible.

Forgiving yourself

This is the part that is often harder.

Many people leaving these relationships carry a great deal of self-blame. For staying. For going back. For not seeing it sooner. For the things they said or did when they were at their most desperate, their most reactive, their least recognizable to themselves. For the ways the relationship changed them. For what it cost them, and sometimes the people around them.

It helps to separate two different things people sometimes blame themselves for.

One is the choices made in the context of the relationship itself — staying, going back, not leaving sooner. Those choices were made under conditions that made leaving genuinely difficult. Staying was not stupidity. Going back was not weakness. Those decisions were shaped by real circumstances, real fear, real attachment, and sometimes real danger. They do not reflect a failure of character.

The other is specific actions — things said or done during the relationship that may have caused harm to others, including children, family members, or the other person themselves. Those are worth taking seriously and processing, potentially with a therapist. They do not make the survivor responsible for the abuse. And they are a different kind of self-examination than self-blame for the relationship itself.

Forgiving yourself does not require concluding that everything you did was right. It is more about recognizing that you were a person in a

genuinely difficult situation, responding as best you could in circumstances that consistently made it hard to respond well, and that that person deserves some of the same compassion you would extend to anyone else in the same situation.

That is not always easy to access. It tends to come in pieces.

Forgiveness and accountability

One thing worth separating clearly: forgiveness for yourself does not require the other person to have been held accountable in any external way.

The legal system may not have responded. The social circle may still take their side. The family may still not understand. The formal or public accountability that might feel like justice may never come.

Forgiveness, in the internal sense described here, does not depend on those things. It is not contingent on the other person acknowledging what they did, apologizing sincerely, or facing consequences.

It is also worth saying clearly: pursuing accountability — through the legal system, through a formal complaint, through whatever avenue is available — is not the same as refusing to heal, and it does not conflict with internal recovery. Some people find that seeking justice is part of how they process what happened. Others find it retraumatizing or not worth the cost. Both are valid, and neither determines whether recovery is possible.

What this section is arguing against is the specific framing in which you cannot put something down internally until the external outcome you need has arrived. That framing places your peace in the hands of a system or a person who may not deliver — and it is worth questioning whether that is actually how you want to organize it.

What it looks like when it comes — if it comes

If forgiveness does arrive, it rarely announces itself.

For some people it is a gradual shift — a week without thinking about it, a name that comes up and lands smaller than it used to. For some it is a decision made once and held, or remade many times. For some it never comes in any form they would call forgiveness, and they still move forward.

It is worth naming something clearly: reduced distress, fewer intrusive thoughts, greater emotional distance from what happened — these are signs of recovery. They are not necessarily signs of forgiveness. They can happen without it. If you experience those changes without feeling that you have forgiven, you have still experienced those changes. That is not a lesser form of healing.

If something does feel like forgiveness when it arrives, it may come and go. That is not evidence that it was not real, or that you have to start over. Recovery — of whatever kind — is not linear.

If you are not there yet

If you are reading this and forgiveness — of them, or of yourself — feels very far away, that is not a problem with you.

Anger and grief are not obstacles you have to get past before you can begin healing. They are real responses to real harm, and they do not need to be resolved before anything else can happen. The idea that you should move past them before you are ready is worth examining. Some people move through them. Some people move alongside them for a long time. Neither is, by itself, evidence that you are failing to heal.

What matters is not reaching forgiveness on a particular schedule. Anger, grief, and recurring thoughts about what happened are not, by themselves, signs that you are failing to heal, and they are not always within your control to simply set aside. They are real responses to real harm. If these experiences are overwhelming, persist without easing, or interfere with your daily life, a qualified mental health professional can help. If you are working with a therapist, those responses are worth bringing into that work rather than trying to resolve them on your own first.

The next chapter is about learning to trust yourself again — your perceptions, your judgment, your sense of what is real — after a relationship that worked to undermine all of those things.

Chapter 39 — Learning to Trust Yourself Again

She caught herself doing it again. Something had felt off in a conversation with a new coworker — a small thing, the way he had dismissed something she said, then repeated it a moment later as if he'd come up with it himself. It was minor. She almost didn't notice.

Then she spent the next two hours convincing herself she had imagined it.

(This is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)

That is what a sustained loss of self-trust looks like from the inside. Not dramatic. Not obviously connected to anything. Just an automatic discounting of your own perception, so practiced it no longer feels like a choice.

How it happened

Chapter 11 covered gaslighting — the specific pattern by which your perceptions, memories, and interpretations of events are contested, minimized, and replaced with someone else's version. This chapter is about what that leaves behind, and what rebuilding looks like.

The self-doubt that many survivors carry out of these relationships is not a character flaw. It is an adaptation — something that developed in response to an environment where trusting your own read on things had consequences. When your perception is consistently challenged, when your memories are rewritten, when your emotional responses are regularly labeled as overreactions, you learn — often unconsciously — to run your perceptions through a filter before acting on them. The filter asks: *Am I sure? Could I be wrong? Am I overreacting?*

That filter may have been an attempt to protect yourself in the original context. You may have used it to try to reduce conflict or keep things calmer. Outside of that context, it can keep working — applied now to situations that do not require it, to perceptions that are accurate, to instincts that deserve to be taken seriously.

What self-trust actually is

Self-trust is not the absence of doubt. It is the capacity to take your own perceptions seriously as data — to let them inform your decisions rather than immediately dismissing them.

It is not about being certain. It is about being willing to notice. To let a feeling of discomfort register rather than immediately explaining it away. To let a sense that something is off sit for a moment rather than immediately arguing yourself out of it.

Many survivors describe a specific pattern: they notice something, feel something, and then immediately begin the process of talking themselves out of it. The noticing happens. The dismissal follows so quickly that the noticing almost does not count. Rebuilding self-trust is, in part, about slowing down that sequence — creating a little more space between the noticing and the judgment about whether the noticing is valid.

Why the doubt stays

One of the more disorienting aspects of recovery is that the self-doubt often continues well past the point where the relationship has ended and the external gaslighting has stopped.

This happens for a few reasons. First, the habit of discounting your own perceptions may have become automatic. Automatic patterns do not always stop just because the circumstances that created them have changed. Some ease as circumstances change; others may take repeated practice and support to shift.

Second, being wrong so many times — or being told you were wrong so many times — can erode the sense that your perceptions are reliable even in contexts where they are. The question “am I sure about this?” becomes a reflex, not an inquiry.

Third, there may be a kind of residual loyalty to the other person’s version of events. If their version was the dominant reality for a long time, returning to your own version can feel disloyal, or presumptuous, or like a revision you are not sure you are entitled to make.

None of these have to define the rest of your life. But they are real, and they can take time to change.

What rebuilding looks like

Rebuilding self-trust is less about arriving at a new confidence and more about being willing to take your own perceptions seriously again — to notice something, consider it, check it against facts where you can, and make a decision — without requiring certainty first.

This includes being wrong sometimes. Rebuilding self-trust does not mean proving that your instincts are always accurate. It means being willing to have them, act on them, and adjust when you get new information — without that adjustment becoming evidence that you cannot trust yourself at all. Everyone gets things wrong. The difference is being able to update and continue, rather than taking each mistake as confirmation that your perception is unreliable.

This happens slowly and often without ceremony. You notice that something felt off, you stay with it rather than immediately dismissing it, and you attend to it. You trust a decision. You notice when it works and when it doesn't. Over time, those accumulated experiences — including the corrections — build a different kind of internal record.

Some specific practices that some people find useful, though none of these are universal:

Journaling. For people who find writing useful, keeping a record of what you noticed at the time — before you have a chance to revise it — can help preserve your original perception when doubt sets in later. This is not for everyone, and it comes with a practical caution: if there is any concern that your phone, computer, or accounts may be monitored, written records in those places may not be private. If that is a concern, the guidance in Chapter 32 on digital safety applies here too. Handwritten journals can also be found. Keep a record only if you can do so safely; it is okay not to keep one.

Naming it when it happens. When you catch yourself dismissing a perception, naming what you are doing — even just internally, "I am doing the thing where I talk myself out of what I noticed" — can interrupt the automatic sequence enough to create a moment of choice.

Giving weight to physical sensations. Many people describe a sense of unease, tension, or contraction that precedes conscious recognition of something being wrong. Those physical signals are worth noticing and

taking seriously — but they are data, not verdicts. A trauma history can trigger strong physical reactions in response to reminders of past harm, even when no current threat is present. Physical discomfort around someone is a reason to pay attention, not necessarily a confirmed signal that the person is dangerous. When it is safe to do so, it is worth checking your read against other information. You do not need proof of danger before taking reasonable steps to protect yourself. If you are in immediate danger, follow the safety guidance in Chapter 32 and seek emergency help as soon as you can safely do so.

Checking with trusted people. In the early period of rebuilding, when your own read on things is not yet reliable to yourself, having a small number of people whose perception you trust can be a resource. Not to outsource your judgment permanently, but to have a cross-reference available.

Heightened vigilance

Some people coming out of these relationships find themselves unusually alert to potential danger — scanning for signs of harm, finding it difficult to trust new situations or new people, reacting strongly to things that feel reminiscent of what they experienced.

This response makes sense given what the nervous system has been through. It is worth distinguishing, though, between heightened alertness in response to actual ongoing risk — which may be entirely appropriate — and a threat-detection system that is responding to reminders of past harm in situations that are not currently dangerous. Both can feel similar from the inside.

If heightened vigilance is making daily life very difficult, or if it is hard to tell the difference between what is actually threatening and what is a reminder, that is worth bringing to a therapist, particularly one familiar with trauma. The goal is not to stop noticing potential danger but to develop more capacity to assess it accurately. For some people that recalibration happens over time with support. For others it is an ongoing area of work.

Trusting yourself about the past

One specific form of self-trust that many survivors struggle with is the question of what actually happened.

The relationship itself was characterized by an ongoing contestation of that question. Coming out of it, many people find themselves in a kind of limbo — no longer inside the other person's version, but not fully settled in their own either. They know what they experienced. They are not sure they are allowed to trust it.

You are allowed to trust it. Your experience of living through that relationship is evidence. It is not less valid because someone spent time telling you it was. The fact that you were not believed does not mean you were wrong.

It may take time to feel that settled rather than just know it. The knowing often comes before the feeling. That is normal.

When someone challenges your perception now

Part of what rebuilding self-trust involves is learning to tolerate the discomfort of disagreement — to hold your own read on something in the presence of someone who sees it differently, without immediately collapsing into their version.

This is a skill, not a personality trait. It was not available in the previous relationship because the cost of maintaining your own version was too high. In safer relationships, the cost is lower. The skill can be practiced.

The goal is not to become immovable or to stop considering other people's perspectives. It is to be able to hold your own perspective long enough to genuinely consider theirs — rather than immediately discarding yours and adopting theirs as the default. Those are different things. Immediately discarding your own view was the survival adaptation — it developed because holding your own read had consequences. Being able to stay with your perspective while genuinely considering someone else's is the skill you are building. It is available as a choice in ways it was not before.

The next chapter is about what healing actually looks like in ordinary life — not as a destination, but as a process that happens in the middle of everything else.

Chapter 40 — What Healing Actually Looks Like Day to Day

She had expected to feel different when it was over. She had imagined a version of herself on the other side — clearer, lighter, done. What she did not expect was that six months out, she would spend a Tuesday crying in her car in a parking lot and then go buy groceries and cook dinner and watch something on her phone before bed, and that all of that would somehow be part of the same day, and that all of it would be fine.

(This is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)

Healing is rarely what people imagine it will be.

It does not arrive as a state. It does not come with a moment where things click into place and you know you are on the other side. For most people, it looks much more like an ordinary Wednesday than a turning point — more like the cumulative effect of many ordinary days than any single thing.

What it is not

Healing is not the absence of pain about what happened.

Many people who are well into recovery still have hard days. They still have moments when something brings it back — a smell, a song, a situation that resembles something from before — and they feel it again. That is not evidence that they have not healed or that they need to start over. It is evidence that significant experiences leave marks, and that those marks do not disappear cleanly on any particular schedule.

Healing is not the same as forgetting. Some people want to forget and find they cannot. Some people do not want to forget — the experience taught them things they want to keep. Neither is required.

Healing is not arriving at a place of peace about everything that happened. Some parts of the experience may remain painful or difficult for a long time. Some may never feel fully resolved. That is not failure. It is the actual shape of recovery from significant harm.

Healing is not linear. This is worth saying plainly, because the expectation of linearity — the sense that things should be getting steadily better — is itself a source of suffering for many people. A bad week after several good ones does not mean you have lost ground. Setbacks are part of the process, not interruptions to it.

What it does look like

For many people, recovery shows up as small shifts in what is possible.

Sleeping better than before. Being able to concentrate on something for longer without being pulled back into thoughts about what happened. Finding that ordinary things — a meal, a conversation, a piece of music — are starting to feel present again rather than muted.

Being able to notice a problem in a new situation without immediately catastrophizing. Finding that a difficult interaction does not send you into a spiral for the rest of the day. Realizing you went several hours without thinking about the relationship — and that this is now a thing that can happen.

(Illustrative example: A person is at work and their manager sends a brief, neutral email — "Can we talk later today?" — with no other context. Six months ago, that message would have sent them into hours of dread, rehearsing every possible thing they had done wrong, bracing for something bad. Today, they feel a flicker of anxiety. They notice it. They remind themselves that the message is neutral and that they do not know what it is about. They turn back to what they were doing. The conversation later turns out to be routine. The day was not perfect, and the anxiety was real — but it passed, and they moved through it. That is what recovery in ordinary moments can look like.)

None of these are dramatic. None of them feel like healing when they are happening. They tend to be noticeable only in retrospect — looking back and realizing that some months ago this would have been much harder, or that the intensity of a particular feeling has changed even if the feeling has not disappeared.

Reconnecting with yourself

One of the quieter aspects of recovery is the gradual return of a sense of yourself — your preferences, your sense of humor, the things you used to care about, the parts of your personality that got smaller during the relationship.

Many survivors describe a period of not knowing what they like, what they think, or who they are outside of the dynamics they were living in. The relationship had occupied so much space that the self outside of it had not had room. Recovery, in part, is that space opening up again.

This can be disorienting rather than pleasant, at least at first. Without the other person's needs and reactions to organize around, there can be a strange emptiness — an absence of direction, a lack of the structure that managing someone else's moods had provided. That feeling is real, and it is temporary for many people.

What fills it, eventually, tends to be small and ordinary. A renewed interest in something that was set aside. A new interest that did not exist before. A slow reacquaintance with what it feels like to make a decision without running it through the filter of how it will be received.

Setbacks

They happen. They are part of this.

A setback might be a week where it feels like nothing has improved, or a week where it feels like it has gotten worse. It might be a contact from the other person that sends you back to feelings you thought you were done with. It might be a new relationship that triggers old patterns. It might just be a bad week that does not have a clear cause.

The most important thing about ordinary setbacks is not to interpret them as evidence that recovery is not happening. Nonlinear does not mean not moving forward. A bad week does not erase the progress of the weeks before it. The question after a setback is not "am I starting over?" It is "what do I need right now?"

Sometimes what you need is rest. Sometimes it is connection. Sometimes it is to talk to someone. Sometimes it is just to let it pass and return to the ordinary structure of the day.

That said, there is a difference between a rough patch and something that needs more support. If you are experiencing symptoms that are severe, persistent, or worsening — difficulty functioning in daily life, or anything that feels beyond what you can manage on your own — that is worth reaching out to a qualified professional about, not waiting through. If you are having thoughts of harming yourself, seek support now. In the United States, you can call or text 988 for crisis support; elsewhere, use a local crisis service. If you are in immediate danger of

harming yourself or cannot keep yourself safe, contact emergency services as soon as you can safely do so. And if contact from the other person involves new threats, stalking, or ongoing abuse, take that seriously as a safety concern and follow the guidance in Chapter 32. A setback is not always something to outlast. Sometimes it is a signal to get more help.

Getting support

Recovery rarely happens entirely alone.

Therapy is one form of support, and for many people it is a significant one — particularly therapy that is informed by an understanding of trauma, coercive control, and the specific dynamics that characterize these relationships. Not all therapists have that background. If you are working with one and what you are describing is not landing, it is worth asking whether they have experience with domestic abuse and coercive control, and worth seeking someone who does if the answer is no. Access to therapy depends on cost, availability, and circumstance. If it is not currently accessible to you, that is a real constraint, not a personal failure. Some survivors work with community organizations, domestic violence advocates, or low-cost counseling programs when private therapy is not an option.

Peer support is another form — groups, online communities, and conversations with other survivors who have lived versions of what you lived. There is something specific that comes from being in contact with people who do not need an explanation, because they already know. That is worth seeking out if it is available to you. One note if you are accessing online communities from a device or account that the other person may still have access to: private browsing does not defeat monitoring software. If you have reason to believe your device or accounts are being monitored, use a safer device the other person has not had access to and cannot access now — a library computer or a trusted friend’s phone, for example. If you need a new account, create and access it from a safer device using recovery information the other person cannot access. Avoid saving passwords on shared or public computers. Be careful about what you share in online groups if it could identify you or put you at risk. Domestic violence advocates can also help with digital safety planning if you are

unsure what is being monitored. The guidance in Chapter 32 applies here too.

The people in your life — the ones who stayed, or the ones who came back after the isolation — are another form, when those people exist and when it is safe to be in contact with them. Letting them back in, being present with them, allowing the ordinary back and forth of safe relationships: that too is part of recovery. Not everyone has that. Isolation can leave people without a network to return to, and rebuilding takes time. If that is where you are, that is a real and hard part of this, and it does not mean recovery is not happening.

None of these are requirements. They are resources. You use what is available to you and what works, and you do not use what doesn't.

What you are building

Recovery is not necessarily a return to who you were before the relationship. For some people, healing feels like finding their way back to themselves — reclaiming something they lost. For others, it feels more like building someone new: a person shaped by what they survived. Both of those are real. Both are valid. What you are building is a person who has been through something significant and has come out on the other side of it still here, still going.

That is not nothing. In fact, that is quite a lot.

The things the relationship cost — time, relationships, pieces of yourself, years — those losses are real and do not need to be minimized. They happened. They matter. And they can exist alongside a present that is genuinely yours: a life organized around your own needs, your own perceptions, your own sense of what matters.

That life does not look like any particular thing. It looks like whatever you are building, in whatever order it comes together, in whatever form makes sense for you.

The next chapter is about boundaries — what they actually are, what they are not, and what it looks like to build them when you have never been allowed to have them.

Chapter 41 — Boundaries: What They Actually Are and How to Build Them

She had been reading about boundaries for two years. Books, articles, forum posts. Everyone said to set them. No one explained what it actually felt like to try.

The first time she told her mother she wasn't going to discuss her ex-partner anymore, her mother cried. And she spent the next three days wondering if she had done something cruel, if she had asked for too much, if boundaries were something other people got to have but she didn't.

(This is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)

The word *boundary* gets used a lot. It has become, in many circles, almost a kind of shorthand — a thing people are encouraged to set without much conversation about what that actually means or what it costs to do it when you have spent years in a relationship where your limits were not allowed to exist.

This chapter is about what boundaries actually are. Not the concept. The thing itself.

What a boundary is not

A boundary is not simply a wall, though sometimes protecting yourself includes ending or severely limiting contact.

A limit can be communicated to someone else, or it can be acted on privately without announcement. It can involve reducing contact, ending contact, or remaining in contact while changing what you share, what you respond to, and what you allow. What all of these have in common is clarity about what you will and will not accept — and then acting on that clarity.

A boundary is not a punishment. It is not something you impose on someone to make them suffer for what they did. It is not a form of control, and it is not about winning or losing. When people describe

boundaries in the language of victory — *I finally stood up to him, I told her what's what* — they are often describing something that is more about the feeling of power than about the boundary itself. That is understandable, especially when power was taken from you for a long time. But it is worth knowing the difference.

A boundary is not an ultimatum in the traditional sense, though it may sound like one. An ultimatum — in the way the word is usually used — is a threat designed to force behavior. A boundary is a description of what you will do, not a command about what someone else must do.

A boundary is not guaranteed to work. This is one of the hardest things to say clearly, because so much of the popular conversation about boundaries implies that if you set them correctly, the other person will respond correctly. Sometimes they will. But when someone repeatedly ignores or overrides your limits, getting the wording right does not make them respect those limits. A boundary is not a tool for changing someone else's behavior. It is a structure for protecting your own.

What a boundary actually is

A boundary is clarity about what you will and will not accept — and then acting on that clarity.

That is the whole of it.

The clarity part: knowing, with yourself first, what you are not willing to accept. Not what the other person should do. What you will do — or stop doing, or stop allowing — in response to what happens.

Some limits are held internally and acted on without announcement: choosing not to share certain information, deciding not to attend certain situations, withdrawing access that was previously available. Those are real limits. They do not require declaration to count.

When a limit is communicated to someone else, following through on what you said is what gives it weight over time. That is where most people find the actual difficulty — not the clarity itself, but acting on it, especially when acting on it is uncomfortable or carries a cost.

Where survivors of coercive control often start

If you were in a relationship where your limits were consistently ignored, overridden, or punished — where expressing a preference led to conflict, where saying no led to escalation, where asserting any sense of self led to consequences — you may have learned, over time, not to have limits at all.

Not consciously. Not as a decision. As an adaptation.

The relationship taught you that your limits were negotiable, that your discomfort was an inconvenience to be managed or dismissed, that the safest version of yourself was the one who didn't ask for much. When a relationship teaches you that for long enough, the lesson does not leave just because the relationship does.

This is why the advice to "just set boundaries" can feel so unhelpful. It assumes you have a working model of your own limits. It assumes you know, in real time, when something is not okay. It assumes that stating a limit and holding it feels like a reasonable available option rather than something that triggers old fear, old guilt, or old silence.

For many survivors, rebuilding the ability to have and hold limits is not a matter of deciding to do so. It is a process of slowly, unevenly, imperfectly learning something that was not safe to know.

Learning what your limits are

Before you can hold a boundary, you have to know what it is. And knowing what it is requires knowing what you feel — which, for many survivors, is not as simple as it sounds.

Coercive control often disrupts the relationship between internal experience and external response. When your feelings were repeatedly invalidated, minimized, or used against you, you may have learned to distrust them. When you expressed discomfort and were told you were overreacting, you may have learned to second-guess whether the discomfort was real. When your emotional responses led to consequences, you may have learned to suppress them before they could be detected.

The work of learning your limits often starts below the level of articulation. It starts with noticing.

Noticing when something feels uncomfortable, even if you cannot immediately say why. Noticing when you feel dread before a particular kind of interaction. Noticing when you feel relief after a particular kind of ending. Noticing what you have been tolerating without naming it as tolerance — things you do because they are easier than the alternative, not because they are okay with you.

This noticing is not dramatic. It tends to happen in ordinary moments. And it tends to happen gradually, over time, as the vigilance from the previous relationship slowly — unevenly — loosens enough for the quieter signals to become audible.

What holding a limit actually requires

With someone who repeatedly overrides your limits, an expressed preference may be treated as the beginning of a negotiation rather than something to be respected. Acting on what you said — over time, in the ways that are possible given your circumstances — is what gives a communicated limit weight.

Limits are practiced, not installed. The first time you try to hold something, it may not go well. You may explain too much. You may apologize. You may give in partway through. Fear, coercion, or the pull of old patterns may interfere. That is not failure. That is what it looks like to practice something difficult under conditions that make it hard.

What holding a limit requires, over time:

Tolerating discomfort. When you say no to something and the other person reacts with disappointment, there may be discomfort. For survivors who learned that someone else's discomfort was always their responsibility to fix, this is one of the harder parts. The discomfort is not evidence that you did something wrong. It is a feeling you may learn to tolerate. But intimidation, threats, and escalating abuse are not discomfort you need to practice tolerating. If stating or acting on a limit could put you in danger, safety comes first — you do not have to announce or enforce that limit in the moment. A domestic violence advocate can help you make a plan that fits your circumstances. See Chapter 32. If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services as soon as you can safely do so.

Not over-explaining. The impulse to justify a limit at length — to give so many reasons that the other person cannot possibly object — can give someone who is already pushing your limits more to argue with. A limit does not require an argument. When it is safe to say it, "I'm not going to do that" is a complete sentence. "I'm not available for that kind of conversation" is a complete sentence. Fewer words may help you avoid getting pulled into another argument, but they do not guarantee that the other person will respect your limit.

Following through over time. When a limit is stated, acting on it — over time, as consistently as circumstances allow — is what gives it weight. This does not mean perfection. Fear, pressure, coercion, and old patterns can all interfere with follow-through, and when they do, that is not evidence of personal failure. It is a description of what it is like to practice something new under difficult conditions. When a limit is not held, the reason matters: a lapse driven by fear or threat is different from a lapse driven by ambivalence. And when someone else violates a limit, that is their decision — not a consequence of imperfect enforcement on your part.

Accepting that some people will leave. This one is worth sitting with. Some relationships — and some people — only work if you do not have limits. If you begin to hold them, the relationship may become difficult or end. That is not evidence that you did something wrong. It is information about what that relationship required of you.

Limits in the context of ongoing contact

For people who share children with someone who has narcissistic patterns, or who have other unavoidable ongoing contact — with a family member, a co-worker, a neighbor — the question of limits takes a particular shape.

No contact is not always available. And the limits that work with someone who respects them function differently with someone who does not.

Where violence is a risk, or where safety is an active concern, what is possible in terms of stated limits is shaped by that risk. Safety planning — developed with an advocate, a shelter, or a legal professional — takes priority over limit-setting in the conventional sense. The goal in

those situations is not to hold the ideal limit but to get through the situation safely.

Where custody orders, court agreements, or other legal structures govern the contact, those structures may require specific behaviors — exchanges, communication, access — that feel in conflict with what you would choose on your own. Working within those constraints while protecting what you can is different from having no limits at all. What you can choose within a mandated situation is still a form of agency, even when the situation itself is not.

In situations of ongoing contact without active safety risk, limits are often less about what you say to the other person and more about what you do — what you share, what you respond to, how much access you allow, what you decide not to engage with. A limit with someone who will not respect a stated one may show up as a decision rather than a declaration: choosing not to respond to provocative messages, choosing not to share personal information, choosing not to defend yourself against accusations that will only be used to extend the argument.

These are limits too, even if they are invisible. They are structures you build around your own behavior rather than around theirs.

What it feels like when it starts to work

The first few times you hold something — a limit that in the past you would have abandoned, an ending to a conversation that in the past would have gone on until you gave in — it may feel strange. Not triumphant. Strange. Sometimes uncomfortable. Sometimes guilty.

The guilt is worth naming, because it is common and because it can pass misleading information. The guilt says: *you did something wrong by having a limit.* Some of that guilt may come from years of learning that having limits was costly, that your needs were an inconvenience, that keeping others comfortable was more important than holding your own ground. Feeling guilty for having a limit does not, by itself, mean you were wrong to have one.

Over time — not all at once, not on any particular schedule — it may start to feel different. Less like an act of courage and more like a

simple statement of fact. Less like something you have to brace for and more like something that is just part of how you operate.

That shift is not always something you can decide to feel. Practice, over time, can help change what feels normal. But recovery is different for different people, and sometimes it takes more than practice — safer circumstances, time, or support.

A note on what boundaries cannot do

A boundary will not make someone treat you well if they do not want to. It will not cause a person who has narcissistic patterns to suddenly recognize your humanity and change. It will not undo what happened, repair what was damaged, or give you back what the relationship cost.

What it can do is protect the present. It can create a structure around your current life — your time, your energy, your attention — that makes space for things other than managing someone else's behavior. It can teach you, gradually, what it feels like to live inside a set of limits that belong to you.

That is not everything. But it is not nothing.

The next chapter is about fear — the specific fear of getting into something like that again, and what it looks like to move toward new relationships when you are carrying that fear with you.

Chapter 42 — The Fear of Getting It Wrong Again

She met someone she liked. He was kind. He asked questions and listened when she answered. He did not make her feel like she was too much or not enough. He texted back at a reasonable time and did not create drama when she was busy. Everything she had wanted, in the abstract.

And she was terrified.

Not of him. Of herself. Of the fact that she had trusted the wrong person before and had not known it. She had felt safe with someone who turned out not to be safe, had trusted someone who turned out not to be trustworthy, had loved someone in a relationship that caused real harm. If she had been that wrong before, how was she supposed to know she wasn't wrong again?

(This is an illustrative example, not a documented case.)

This is an aspect of surviving a harmful relationship that deserves more attention: the specific fear that arrives when something good shows up. The fear that you cannot trust your own read of people. That the same qualities that drew you in before — the intensity, the certainty, the feeling of being chosen — might be drawing you in again, and you will not know until it is too late.

This chapter is about that fear, where it comes from, and what it looks like to move forward while you are still carrying it.

Where the fear comes from

The fear makes sense. That is worth saying plainly before anything else. It is not irrational. It is not proof that you are broken or damaged in some permanent way. It is a reasonable response to a specific kind of experience.

For some survivors, the fear comes from having trusted someone whose behavior later looked very different from what they had experienced early on. Sometimes there was deliberate deception.

Sometimes the harmful behavior emerged gradually, unevenly, in ways that were hard to see when they were happening. You responded to what you were shown. That does not make you naive or foolish.

Then the presentation changed. The person who had seemed so safe turned out not to be. And your trust in your own perceptions became, understandably, a casualty of that.

If you were deceived, the fear that you will be deceived again makes sense. And even if you cannot know exactly why the other person's behavior changed, it makes sense that you might be afraid of getting it wrong again. The question is what you do with that fear.

What the fear can teach you

One thing the fear is doing: paying attention. It is running surveillance that did not exist before, watching for things that your earlier self might have explained away or minimized. That is not pathological. That is information the previous experience gave you.

Survivors who have been in coercive relationships often describe a heightened attentiveness to things they did not track before: inconsistencies in what someone says, mismatches between words and behavior, the feeling in the body when something is slightly off. That attentiveness is worth something. It is not infallible, but it is real data.

The fear can also point toward what you value — what you are specifically afraid of losing, what you are trying to protect. If the fear says *what if he eventually does what the last one did*, it is pointing at the particular harm you experienced. If it says *what if I disappear again*, it is pointing at the loss of self that was one of the costs. Those are worth knowing. They tell you what matters to you.

What the fear can distort

The fear has limits. Because it is calibrated to what happened before, it can misread things.

Conflict is one area where this happens. In a relationship where conflict repeatedly led to escalation, punishment, extended silent treatment, or some form of harm, conflict may have been dangerous. Some survivors come out of those relationships with a strong fear of conflict: any disagreement feels like the beginning of something bad.

In healthier relationships, conflict is not necessarily a warning sign. It is a normal part of two people with different needs and perspectives being in proximity to each other. The difference is what happens during and after: whether conflict is a conversation that can reach some kind of resolution, or whether it is a weapon used to establish dominance.

Intensity is another area. If the previous relationship involved early-stage love bombing — the overwhelming attention, the feeling of being deeply seen and chosen — the memory of that can run in two opposite directions. It can make you suspicious of intensity, fearing that warmth is a trap. Or it can still feel compelling, still produce the same pull, because that is what the previous relationship trained you to find. Neither response is inherently right. Both are worth noticing.

The question of red flags

People often come out of these relationships wanting a list. Tell me the things to watch for. Give me the specific behaviors that mean danger, so I can avoid them.

The list is real. Many of the behaviors this book has described — patterns of idealization and devaluation, control and accountability-avoidance, the way conflict is handled — are worth learning to recognize. That knowledge is useful.

But the list has limits, and those limits are worth knowing too.

One limit: there is no single sequence that all harmful relationships follow, and harmful patterns do not always announce themselves in a consistent order or on a consistent timeline. Some emerge early. Some emerge slowly, long after a significant attachment has formed. Some are present from the beginning but invisible under the intensity of the early period. This is not a reason to stop paying attention — it is a reason to keep paying attention over time, not just in the beginning.

A second limit: the fear of red flags can produce false positives. Someone who is simply direct, or confident, or who moves quickly because they are genuinely interested, may trigger the same signals as someone who is performing confidence or performing interest for a

purpose. The body's alarm system is recalibrated by experience but not perfectly recalibrated.

When you are unsure about a behavior, it can help to pay attention to what happens over time — how the pattern develops, whether the behavior is consistent, how the person responds to your limits, your needs, and your honest self. But you do not have to wait for a pattern to develop before taking a warning sign seriously or stepping away. Threats, violence, stalking, and coercion deserve attention even if they happen once. If you are concerned about your safety, see Chapter 32. If you are in immediate danger, seek emergency help as soon as you can safely do so.

What healthy actually feels like

For some survivors, there is a specific kind of disorientation that comes with encountering something healthier. If intensity and urgency became associated with love in the previous relationship, something calm can feel dull. If you learned to earn affection through effort, affection that arrives without earning can feel unfamiliar, even suspicious. If hypervigilance and anxious monitoring became the texture of intimacy, peace can feel like absence.

This does not mean calm is wrong. Sometimes it means calm is unfamiliar.

For some people, getting used to the feeling of safety — of not waiting for the other shoe, of not having to manage someone else's mood to protect yourself, of genuine reciprocity — is part of recovery. It may take time, safer experiences, or support for what is good to feel good, rather than just feeling quiet.

Some survivors describe feeling uncertain in relationships that seem steady and reciprocal. The electricity isn't there. The pull isn't there. Sometimes steadiness is unfamiliar; sometimes you simply do not feel a connection. If you want to continue getting to know someone and it is safe to do so, it is worth going slowly and paying attention. You do not owe anyone a relationship because they seem healthy.

That said, calm is not by itself a guarantee that a relationship is healthy. Some harmful dynamics are low-drama — quiet control,

gradual isolation, emotional unavailability — without the intensity that might trigger alarms. What matters is not the temperature of the relationship but the pattern over time: whether there is real reciprocity, whether your limits are respected, whether you feel like yourself in it.

Moving forward without requiring yourself to have no fear

This is the core of it.

The fear may not go away before you try again. For many people, it doesn't. The fear is there, and you move anyway, not because the fear told you it was safe but because you decided that waiting for certainty was not a viable plan.

What can change, over time, is your relationship to the fear. Not its presence, but what you do with it. Whether you treat it as the final word or as one source of information among several. Whether it makes all the decisions or sits alongside other things — what you observe, what you experience over time, what you learn about someone through the ordinary accumulation of days.

There is no way to guarantee you will not be hurt again. That guarantee does not exist for anyone, in any relationship. What can change after surviving coercive control is your relationship to risk — the information you have, your knowledge of your own limits, and the support available to help you hold them. None of that makes you responsible for preventing someone else's harmful behavior.

You will not be the same person going in this time. You have been changed by what happened. Some of what changed is loss. Some of it is knowledge you did not have before. Both are real.

What you are not required to do

You are not required to be fully healed before you are allowed to try again. You are not required to arrive at a relationship without fear, without history, without the marks of what you have been through.

You are also not required to pursue a romantic relationship again at all. Some survivors do. Some don't. Some find that friendships, community, creative work, or time alone are more than enough — not as a temporary holding pattern but as a genuine and complete way of living. That is not settling. That is a life built on your own terms.

For those who do want to try again: there is no schedule. Some survivors move toward new relationships relatively quickly. Others take years. All of those are legitimate paths.

What you are building toward — if a romantic relationship is what you want — is not fearlessness. It is enough trust in yourself to move at your own pace, to let time do its work, and to step away if you want to. You do not have to be certain that something is wrong. If leaving could put you in danger, the safety guidance in Chapter 32 applies here too.

The final chapter is about what comes next — not a destination you have to reach, but the ongoing ordinary work of a life that belongs to you.

Chapter 43 — What Comes Next

There is a version of this book that ends with a list of what your life will look like from here. The relationships you will build. The clarity you will feel. The person you will become.

This is not that version.

Not because those things are impossible — for many people, in many forms, pieces of that do happen over time. But because you have been told enough times what you will feel, what you will discover, what you will become — told with a certainty that turned out not to be true. And one of the things that gets to be different now is that your future does not need to be described to you in advance. It gets to be yours, unscripted, in whatever form it actually takes.

What forward looks like when it doesn't look like anything in particular

For many people, what comes next is not a dramatic transformation. It is ordinary life, moving in an ordinary direction — made significant not because it matches a picture but because it belongs to you.

It might look like a morning where you wake up and your first thought is not about the relationship, or about what you survived, but about something that is happening today. Something small. Something forward-facing. And maybe you do not even notice that this is different until later.

It might look like a conversation where someone says something that once would have sent you into a spiral, and you feel it, and then you let it go, and you keep going.

It might look like choosing something for yourself — a direction, a plan, a decision — without running it through someone else's approval first. It might look like being wrong about something and not collapsing. It might look like a relationship, new or restored, in which you feel like a whole person rather than a person shaped around someone else's needs.

None of these look like arrival. They look like living. That is what forward looks like.

What you carry

You will carry things from this. That is honest, and it is worth saying plainly.

Some of what you carry is loss. Time, relationships, pieces of yourself that were ground down during the relationship, and then the additional time and energy and grief of getting out and finding your way back. Those losses do not disappear. They are part of the story of your life, and they are yours to hold however you need to hold them.

Some of what you carry is knowledge. A specific understanding of how certain things work — how manipulation operates, what coercive control looks like from the inside, what it costs, what it does to a person. That knowledge is not a wound. It is real, hard-won information that many people do not have and that you now do.

Some of what you carry is yourself: everything that survived. The parts of you that held on through it, that did not entirely disappear even when the relationship made you small. The capacity to care, to try, to reach for connection even after what connection did to you last time — that is not nothing. That is, in fact, quite a lot.

The question of meaning

Some survivors want to find meaning in what happened. They want the experience to have served something — to have made them wiser, stronger, more compassionate, more useful to others who are going through the same thing. That is a real and legitimate response to surviving something hard. For many people, that impulse becomes something: advocacy, support work, parenting informed by what they learned, relationships that are richer for the awareness they carry.

Some survivors do not want to find meaning. They want what happened to them to have been wrong — not a lesson, not a growth opportunity, not something that made them who they are in a way they should feel grateful for. That is also a legitimate response. The experience was not supposed to happen to you. It was not some necessary curriculum. The fact that you survived it and learned from it is a consequence of surviving, not a justification for the harm itself.

Both of those responses are allowed. Both can be true in different moments, in the same person, over time.

To the person who is still inside it

If you are reading this and you are still in the relationship — not on the other side yet, not even close — this book was written for you too.

Not to push you toward a particular decision. Not to tell you what you should do or when you should do it. But to say: what you are experiencing is real. What you have been told about yourself — that you are too sensitive, too demanding, too much, not enough, lucky to have what you have — is not accurate. The confusion you feel is not a character flaw. It is a reasonable response to being in something that produces confusion — where the signals are contradictory, where the rules shift, where your own perceptions are regularly undermined.

Many people find their own way through this, in their own time, in whatever way is possible given everything that is true for them. You may too. The fact that you are trying to understand it — that you picked up this book, that you are naming something — matters. You do not have to wait until you are ready to leave to ask for help with your safety. A domestic violence advocate can help you make a plan that fits your circumstances. See Chapter 32. If you are in immediate danger, seek emergency help as soon as you can safely do so.

To the person who just got out

If you just left, or if leaving happened to you in some way — an ending that was not entirely your choice — you may be standing in something that does not feel like freedom yet. It may feel like grief, or relief, or nothing at all. All of that is real.

For many people, things that feel impossible right now do become more possible over time. Things that feel unbearable do, for many, become something that hurts less often, with less intensity, for shorter stretches. That is not guaranteed — recovery does not follow a single path — but it is what a great many survivors describe looking back.

You do not have to rush that. You do not have to perform recovery. You do not have to arrive anywhere on any particular schedule.

Just keep going. And you do not have to do it alone. If what you are carrying is overwhelming, getting worse, or interfering with your daily life, reach out for qualified professional support. If you are thinking about harming yourself or cannot keep yourself safe, seek help now — see the crisis guidance in Chapter 40. If you are facing new threats,

stalking, or ongoing abuse, the safety guidance in Chapter 32 applies here too.

To the person who has been out for years

If you have been out for a long time and you are still carrying it — still returning to the question of how it happened, still feeling it in your body, still untangling the ways the relationship shaped you — you are not behind where you should be. There is no schedule. There is no point past which you should be done.

What happened to you was significant. Significant experiences leave marks. The marks change over time — their texture, their weight, what they respond to — but they may not disappear entirely, and they do not have to. You can live a full life while still carrying them.

That is what many survivors do. Not because the carrying is easy. Because life is happening and they are in it, carrying what they carry, and going anyway.

What this book wanted to do

This book wanted to give you language. For what you experienced. For why it worked the way it did, why it was hard to leave, why it still affects you, why recovery looks the way it does.

Language does not undo anything. But it closes the distance between your experience and your ability to talk about it, think about it, make sense of it. It makes it possible to say: *this happened, it has a name, I am not alone in this, and it was not my fault.*

That is what this book wanted to leave you with. Not a fixed self. Not a promise about the future. Just those things:

This happened. It has a name. You are not alone in this. It was not your fault.

The rest is yours to write.

End of Part Seven

End of Chapters

CONCLUSION

A Note From Melissa

I did not write this book as an expert looking in from the outside.

I wrote it as someone who lived inside it — more than once, in different forms, with different people — and who spent years trying to understand what had happened to her and why it had been so hard to see while it was happening.

I built Torch & Soul because I did not want anyone to have to do that alone the way I did. Without language for what they were experiencing. Without anyone who had been through it to tell them: this is real, it has a name, it was not your fault, and you are not crazy for being confused by it.

This book is what I wish had existed when I was in it.

The thing I want to leave you with is not complicated.

You were not weak for staying. You were not stupid for not seeing it sooner. You were not too sensitive, too demanding, too much, or not enough. You were a person in a relationship where the signals were contradictory, where your perceptions were regularly undermined, where the person who hurt you was also the person you loved. That produces confusion. It is supposed to be hard to see from the inside. That is not a character flaw. That is what it actually looks like to be in this.

The fact that you are still trying to understand it says something important about you: you are still here. Still asking questions. Still reaching for clarity.

That matters.

If this book helped you name something you had been living without a name for — good. If it helped you feel less alone in an experience that can be profoundly isolating — good. If it gave you language to use with a therapist, a friend, a family member, or just yourself — good.

If it raised more questions than it answered — that is also okay. These things are complicated. No single book contains everything. What I hope is that something in here opened a door, and that you will keep walking through it, in whatever way works for you.

Torch & Soul exists because I believe that people who have been through this deserve support, community, and clarity — not judgment, not shame, not a checklist of what they should have done differently. You can find that community at torchandsoul.com.

You have been through something hard. You are still here. And wherever you are in this — still inside it, just getting out, years out and still making sense of it — you are not alone.

That was always true. It just may not have felt like it.

— Melissa Bilbruck Torch & Soul

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am not a therapist, a psychologist, or a licensed clinical professional of any kind.

I am a person who survived multiple relationships with narcissistic patterns — including one that lasted years, one that involved coercive control, and several that left me questioning my own sanity before I finally had language for what I had experienced. I am the founder of Torch & Soul, a platform built to provide education, community, and support for people navigating these dynamics.

This book draws on my own experience, on the experiences of people in the Torch & Soul community who have shared their stories with me over the years, and on published research and clinical literature about narcissistic personality patterns, coercive control, trauma, and recovery. Where I reference research or clinical concepts, I have worked to characterize them accurately and to qualify claims appropriately — using language like "research suggests," "for many people," and "some people describe" rather than overstating what the evidence supports.

This book is not a substitute for professional support. If you are in a dangerous situation, please prioritize your safety and contact a domestic violence advocate or hotline. If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services as soon as you can safely do so. If you are experiencing significant mental health symptoms — difficulty functioning or anything that feels beyond what you can manage — please reach out to a mental health professional. If you are thinking about harming yourself, seek help now. In the United States, call or text 988 for crisis support; elsewhere, use a local crisis service. If you cannot keep yourself safe, contact emergency services as soon as you can safely do so. The Resource Guide at the back of this book includes organizations and resources that may help.

The illustrative examples throughout this book reflect patterns drawn from real experiences — my own, those shared with me through the Torch & Soul community, and situations I have witnessed or heard described over many years. They are not word-for-word accounts of

specific individuals, and details have been generalized to focus on the pattern rather than the person.

Where people from my own life appear in or inform this book, I have written from my own experience and perspective. The experiences are real. Some situations are described in ways that focus on the patterns and dynamics rather than disclosing every detail, but nothing has been fabricated.

I wrote this book because I lived what many of its readers are living, and because I believe that lived experience, honestly examined and carefully shared, has real value alongside clinical expertise. I also believe that people who have been through these experiences deserve to be spoken to directly, without euphemism, without minimization, and without being made to feel that their confusion was their fault.

It was not. It is not. That is what this book is for.

— Melissa Bilbruck

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book exists because of the people in the Torch & Soul community who showed up, kept coming back, and shared their experiences honestly — often at significant personal cost. I will not name you here because your stories belong to you. But you shaped every chapter of this book, and I am grateful for your trust.

To my oldest daughter: you have been my anchor through more than I can say here. Your steadiness made this possible.

To everyone who reached out after finding Torch & Soul and said *this is me, this is my life, how did you know* — that is why I built it. That is why I wrote this. You were never alone in it, even when it felt that way.

This book was written with the support of people who believed it was worth writing before I had finished it. You know who you are.

RESOURCE GUIDE

These organizations and resources may be helpful depending on where you are in your situation. This list is not exhaustive, and inclusion here does not constitute a clinical endorsement. Resources change — verify current contact information before reaching out.

If you are in immediate danger

Call 911 or your local emergency services.

Domestic violence support and safety planning

The National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233 | TTY: 1-800-787-3224 Text START to 88788 Chat available at thehotline.org *Available 24/7. Confidential support, safety planning, and referrals to local resources.*

loveisrespect (National Dating Abuse Helpline) 1-866-331-9474 | Text loveis to 22522 Chat available at loveisrespect.org *Focused on dating relationships, including teen and young adult relationships.*

Legal and financial assistance

WomensLaw.org womenslaw.org *Legal information and referrals for people experiencing domestic violence, including information on protection orders by state.*

National Domestic Violence Hotline — Financial Abuse Resources thehotline.org/resources/financial-abuse/ *The Hotline provides resources on financial abuse, economic safety planning, and rebuilding financial independence.*

Digital safety

Safety Net Project (National Network to End Domestic Violence) techsafety.org *Guidance on digital privacy, device monitoring, and technology safety for survivors.*

Important: Private or incognito browsing does not protect against monitoring software installed on a device. If you believe your device or accounts may be monitored, the Safety Net Project's website at techsafety.org provides published guidance on assessing common

monitoring risks. For individualized help specific to your situation, a domestic violence advocate can work through your digital safety options with you directly — contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at thehotline.org or 1-800-799-7233 to connect with one.

Mental health support

Psychology Today Therapist Finder
psychologytoday.com/us/therapists *Search for therapists by specialty, including trauma, domestic abuse, and coercive control.*

Open Path Collective openpathcollective.org *Reduced-cost therapy for individuals in financial need.*

Crisis Text Line Text HOME to 741741 *Free, 24/7 crisis support via text.*

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Call or text 988 *Available 24/7 for people in emotional distress or crisis.*

Narcissistic abuse and coercive control — education and community

Torch & Soul torchandsoul.com *Education, community, and support for people navigating narcissistic patterns and coercive control.*

For survivors with children

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline 1-800-422-4453 *Crisis intervention and referrals for families.*

National Child Traumatic Stress Network nctsn.org *Resources for children and families affected by trauma.*

Eating disorder support

National Alliance for Eating Disorders
allianceforeatingdisorders.com | 1-866-662-1235 *Helpline and referrals for people with eating disorders and their families.*

Suggested reading

The following books are frequently cited by survivors and professionals working in this area. Inclusion is not a clinical endorsement; evaluate each resource for your own situation.

Lundy Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (2002)

Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life* (2007)

Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014)

Peter Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* (1997)

Patrick Carnes, *The Betrayal Bond: Breaking Free of Exploitive Relationships* (1997)

Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992)

If you are outside the United States, search for your country's national domestic violence hotline or contact a local crisis organization. Many countries have equivalent services.

GLOSSARY

Terms used in this book, defined in plain language.

Coercive control A pattern of behavior used to dominate, manipulate, and restrict another person's freedom over time. Includes psychological abuse, isolation, financial control, monitoring, threats, and other tactics that do not always involve physical violence but create a climate of fear and dependency. Recognized as a form of domestic abuse in many legal jurisdictions.

Complex PTSD (C-PTSD) A set of symptoms that can develop following prolonged, repeated trauma — particularly trauma that occurred in a context of captivity or relationship dependency, where escape was difficult or impossible. Differs from PTSD in that it also includes difficulties with emotional regulation, negative self-perception, and problems in relationships. The term is used by many clinicians and in survivor communities; it appears in the ICD-11 but not in the current DSM-5-TR. Diagnosis and treatment are carried out by qualified mental health professionals.

DARVO An acronym for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. A response pattern in which someone who has caused harm denies the behavior, attacks the person raising it, and positions themselves as the real victim. First described by psychologist Jennifer Freyd.

Devaluation A pattern in relationships with narcissistic dynamics in which the other person is criticized, dismissed, or treated with contempt. Often follows an earlier period of idealization, though not every relationship follows this sequence, and the shift can be gradual or sudden. Some relationships cycle between idealization and devaluation repeatedly.

Discard In relationships with narcissistic patterns, an ending or significant withdrawal — often abrupt and without adequate explanation. May follow repeated cycles of idealization and devaluation, though not all relationships follow a predictable progression.

Flying monkeys People who, knowingly or unknowingly, carry out or reinforce a harmful person's agenda — delivering messages, gathering information, pressuring the target, or defending the harmful person. The term comes from *The Wizard of Oz*.

Future faking A pattern of repeatedly making promises about the future — plans, commitments, changes — that do not materialize. What distinguishes future faking from ordinary broken promises is the repetition and the relational function: the promises recur, often in cycles, and they tend to appear when the relationship is under strain or the other person is considering leaving. The term describes the observable pattern, not a specific internal motive.

Gaslighting A sustained pattern in which one person's behavior causes another to question their own perceptions, memory, or sense of reality. Named after the 1944 film *Gaslight*. The term is sometimes used for deliberate manipulation; it can also describe a persistent pattern that has this effect regardless of intent. A single disagreement about what was said or what happened is not gaslighting; the term describes an ongoing dynamic in which the other person's sense of reality is repeatedly called into question.

Gray rock method A behavioral approach used by people in unavoidable contact with someone with harmful patterns. Involves giving minimal, neutral, low-engagement responses — making oneself as uninteresting and non-reactive as possible — in order to reduce conflict and limit the other person's access to emotional information. Not appropriate in all situations; safety planning should be considered first.

Hoover Renewed contact after a separation or a period of no contact may be described as a "hoover" in survivor communities. Such contact may reopen communication or access, but contact alone does not establish why it happened. The term is named after the vacuum cleaner brand.

Hypervigilance A state of heightened alertness and sensitivity to potential threat, often developed in response to prolonged unpredictability or harm in a close relationship. People who have experienced coercive or harmful relationship dynamics may find

themselves scanning constantly for warning signs, having difficulty relaxing, or responding intensely to situations that remind them of past harm. Hypervigilance is a nervous system response to conditions, not a character flaw or overreaction.

Idealization A pattern in relationships with narcissistic dynamics in which the other person is treated as exceptional, elevated, or perfect. Often accompanies intense attention, affection, and declarations of connection — commonly called love bombing. Idealization frequently appears early in a relationship, though it can recur at other points, particularly after conflict or when a person is considering leaving.

Love bombing Intense attention, affection, flattery, and declarations of connection, often early in a relationship. The term is sometimes used when that intensity occurs alongside pressure, boundary violations, or later control. Intense affection alone does not prove manipulation or predict that abuse will follow.

Low contact A strategy for managing unavoidable contact with a person who has harmful patterns, involving reduced frequency, limited personal information, written-only communication, or other restrictions on access.

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) A clinical diagnosis described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR), characterized by a pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy. Diagnosed by qualified mental health professionals. This book discusses narcissistic patterns more broadly, not exclusively in people with a clinical diagnosis.

Narcissistic supply A term used in the clinical and survivor community to describe the attention, admiration, reaction, or emotional response that people with narcissistic patterns may seek from others. Not a formal clinical term.

No contact A strategy for protecting oneself from further harm by ending all communication with a person. May not be fully available to people who share children or have other unavoidable ongoing contact.

Parentification A dynamic in which a child is placed in the role of emotional caretaker, confidant, or mediator for a parent. The child's

own emotional needs are subordinated to the parent's, and the child may be expected to manage the parent's feelings, absorb their distress, or act as an ally against the other parent or other family members. Recognized as a form of emotional boundary violation that can have lasting effects on a child's development and adult relationships.

Projection Attributing one's own feelings, behaviors, or motivations to another person. In harmful relationships, accusations may sometimes resemble the accusing person's own conduct. An accusation by itself does not prove projection or establish what the accusing person has done or intended.

Smear campaign An effort by a person with narcissistic patterns to damage another person's reputation — with mutual contacts, family members, or the broader community — often in anticipation of or following a separation.

Trauma bond An attachment formed under conditions of intermittent reward and punishment, fear, and dependency. Research on trauma bonding draws on work by Patrick Carnes and others studying coercive relationships. The bond is a response to conditions, not evidence of weakness or irrationality.

Intermittent reinforcement A pattern in which reward and punishment alternate unpredictably. In the context of coercive relationships, the unpredictable cycle of affection and withdrawal, approval and criticism, can create a strong psychological attachment that is difficult to disengage from — not because the relationship is good, but because the unpredictability itself keeps the person oriented toward seeking the next moment of approval.

Narcissistic injury The term used in clinical and survivor communities to describe the intense reaction some people with narcissistic patterns have to perceived criticism, rejection, or failure. The reaction is typically disproportionate to the trigger. Not a formal DSM term.

Narcissistic rage An intense, often disproportionate anger response associated with narcissistic injury. Can include verbal attacks, withdrawal, or other punishing behaviors. The term describes an observable pattern of response, not a clinical diagnosis.

Silent treatment Withdrawing or refusing communication, sometimes as punishment or a means of control. Repeated silence used to pressure or punish someone can be harmful. Silence can also arise from overwhelm or a need for safety or distance; a communicated break or protective disengagement should not automatically be treated as abuse.

Triangulation Bringing a third person, past relationship, or implied competitor into a relationship dynamic in a way that creates pressure, insecurity, jealousy, or competition. In some harmful relationships, repeated comparisons or third-party involvement can undermine trust or exert control. Mentioning a third party alone does not establish manipulation or prove anyone’s intent.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

This section provides reference notes for clinical concepts, research findings, and named frameworks used in the book.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder The diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder are described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR). American Psychiatric Association, 2022.

Coercive control The framework of coercive control as a distinct form of domestic abuse was developed by sociologist Evan Stark. See: Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*. Oxford University Press.

DARVO The DARVO concept was developed by psychologist Jennifer Freyd in research on betrayal trauma. See: Freyd, J. J. (1997). Violations of power, adaptive blindness, and betrayal trauma theory. *Feminism & Psychology, 7*(1), 22–32.

Trauma bonding Patrick Carnes's work on trauma bonding describes attachment formed under conditions of intermittent reward and punishment. See: Carnes, P. (1997). *The Betrayal Bond: Breaking Free of Exploitive Relationships*. Health Communications, Inc.

Intermittent reinforcement Research on intermittent reinforcement schedules and their effects on behavior originates in B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning research. The application of reinforcement principles to understanding attachment in coercive relationships is discussed in the trauma bonding literature. See: Carnes, P. (1997). The Betrayal Bond: Breaking Free of Exploitive Relationships. Health Communications, Inc.

Betrayal trauma Betrayal trauma theory was developed by Jennifer Freyd and colleagues to describe the psychological impact of trauma perpetrated by a trusted person. See: Freyd, J. J. (1996). *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*. Harvard University Press.

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) EMDR is included in the VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guidelines for PTSD

treatment and has a substantial research base. See: Shapiro, F. (2018). *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy: Basic Principles, Protocols, and Procedures* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

Somatic Experiencing Somatic Experiencing was developed by Peter Levine. For an overview, see: Levine, P. A. (1997). *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*. North Atlantic Books. Note that the evidence base for Somatic Experiencing is less established than for EMDR; research is ongoing.

Hypervigilance and the nervous system response to trauma For research on the physiological effects of prolonged trauma and stress, see: van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking.

Narcissistic abuse and the survivor community The term "narcissistic abuse" is widely used in survivor communities and in popular literature, though it is not a formal clinical diagnostic category. The book uses this language to reflect how survivors describe their experience while noting its non-clinical status.

Protection orders and legal effectiveness Research on the effectiveness of protection orders in reducing violence is mixed and varies by jurisdiction and enforcement. For a systematic review of the evidence, see: Cordier, R., Chung, D., Wilkes-Gillan, S., & Speyer, R. (2021). The effectiveness of protection orders in reducing recidivism in domestic violence: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 22(4), 804–828. The National Domestic Violence Hotline and WomensLaw.org provide current state-by-state information.

Digital monitoring and safety Current guidance on technology safety for survivors is maintained by the Safety Net Project of the National Network to End Domestic Violence at techsafety.org.

Cycle of violence Psychologist Lenore Walker described a pattern of tension, explosion, and reconciliation in relationships involving battering. See: Walker, L. E. (1979). The Battered Woman. Harper & Row.

Separation risk and lethality in intimate partner violence Research consistently identifies the period around leaving a controlling relationship as associated with elevated risk. For femicide risk factors, see: Campbell, J. C., Webster, D., Koziol-McLain, J., Block, C., Campbell, D., Curry, M. A., Gary, F., Glass, N., McFarlane, J., Sachs, C., Sharps, P., Ulrich, Y., Wilt, S. A., Manganello, J., Xu, X., Schollenberger, J., Frye, V., & Laughon, K. (2003). Risk factors for femicide in abusive relationships: Results from a multisite case control study. American Journal of Public Health, 93(7), 1089–1097. PMID 12835191. For nonfatal strangulation as a homicide risk factor, see: Glass, N., Laughon, K., Campbell, J., Block, C. R., Hanson, G., Sharps, P. W., & Taliaferro, E. (2008). Non-fatal strangulation is an important risk factor for homicide of women. Journal of Emergency Medicine, 35(3), 329–335. PMID 17961956.

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