

THE EXTRACTION PATTERN

What Is Happening to You

A field guide to the tactics, the damage
and the way through

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A companion guide to The Extraction Pattern

You are not losing your mind. You are losing a fight you didn't know you were in.

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This guide explains what the extraction pattern is doing to you – specifically, practically, in language that matches your experience. It names the tactics so you can recognise them in real time. It describes the damage so you understand why you feel the way you do. And it gives you tools to protect yourself, starting today.

Throughout this guide, I refer to **the grandmother** – a concept from *The Extraction Pattern*. In every village, for three hundred thousand years, there was a figure who held the long memory of the community. Not necessarily a literal grandmother, but someone who had been watching for decades and could validate your perception when you doubted yourself. She is the book’s shorthand for the function the pattern needs to defeat: community memory that confirms your doubt before the pattern talks you out of it. Everything that follows is about rebuilding her, in whatever form your life allows.

1. What They Are Doing to You

The extraction pattern uses an integrated toolkit. Every tool serves the same purpose: preventing you from seeing what is happening. Understanding each one breaks its power.

Word salad

You raise a concern. Twenty minutes later, the conversation has gone through six topics, three accusations, two reversals and a tearful monologue – and your original point has vanished completely. You walk away confused, exhausted and unable to remember what you were trying to say.

This is not a failure of communication. It is a strategy. Word salad works by overwhelming your capacity to track an argument. The function is not to resolve the issue. The function is to make you stop raising issues.

How to deal with word salad

Write your point down before the conversation. One sentence. When the conversation spirals, return to that sentence. “I understand, but my point is [sentence].” If they spiral again, say it again. If they spiral a third time, end the conversation: “We’re not getting anywhere. I’ll put this in writing.” Then email it. The email creates a record the word salad was designed to prevent.

Gaslighting

“That didn’t happen.” “You’re remembering it wrong.” “I never said that.” “You’re being paranoid.” Over time, you stop trusting your own memory. You start prefacing statements with “I think” and “maybe” and “I could be wrong.” You check with them before trusting your own perception.

That is the function. Gaslighting doesn’t need you to believe their version. It just needs you to stop trusting yours.

How to deal with gaslighting

Document in real time. Email yourself after every important conversation – thirty seconds. Better still, send a WhatsApp to a trusted friend – their independent copy is harder to challenge. Screenshot messages before they can be unsent. Download the **Bright Sky app** (by Hestia, endorsed by NHS England) – it is disguised as a weather app and logs incidents in text, audio or photo to a secure email. When they say “that didn’t happen,” you have a record dated the day it happened. The record defeats the rewrite.

Triangulation

“Your sister said she’s worried about you.” “Everyone at work thinks you’re overreacting.” “My therapist says you have attachment issues.” They bring absent third parties into the conversation, always saying things that isolate you or undermine your position. You never hear these things directly from the people supposedly saying them.

The function of triangulation is to prevent coalition. If you and your sister are resenting each other instead of comparing notes, the pattern is safe. If you believe your colleagues think you’re difficult, you won’t ask them what they actually see.

How to deal with triangulation

Check directly. Call your sister: “Did you say you’re worried about me?” Most of the time, they didn’t. Sometimes they said something quite different that was repackaged. Occasionally they did say it – because the extractor had primed them with a version of events. Either way, the direct conversation rebuilds the coalition the triangulation was designed to prevent. Every note you compare is another grandmother rebuilt.

DARVO

Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. You name a behaviour. They deny it happened. They attack you for raising it – you’re controlling, you’re paranoid, you’re the abusive one. Then they position themselves as the victim of your accusation. Within minutes, you are apologising for raising the concern.

DARVO is the nuclear option. It is deployed when recognition gets too close. If you are experiencing DARVO, the pattern is responding to a genuine threat – which means your recognition is accurate.

How to deal with DARVO

Name it silently. When you feel the conversation reversing – when you went in with a concern and are now defending yourself – that is DARVO operating. Do not continue the conversation. Say: “I can see we’re not going to resolve this now. I’ll think about what you’ve said.” Then leave. Write down what happened. The record protects you from the guilt the reversal is designed to produce.

The smear campaign

If you are leaving – or if they sense you are preparing to leave – the narrative will be seeded before you act. Your friends will hear a version. Your family will hear a version. Your colleagues, your children's school, your mutual acquaintances. The version will be consistent, plausible and devastating. You will be the unstable one. The difficult one. The abusive one.

This is pre-emptive narrative control. By the time you try to tell your story, the audience has already heard theirs. You arrive sounding like the unreliable narrator they described.

How to deal with the smear campaign

You cannot win a narrative war with someone who has no constraints on what they will say. Do not try. Instead: tell your truth to the people who matter, briefly, factually. Do not attack them in response – it confirms the narrative they have built. Let your conduct speak. The people who know you will see the discrepancy between who you are and who you are being described as. The people who believe the smear without checking were never your coalition. Let them go.

2. The Betrayal You Cannot Comprehend

The hardest part is not the tactics. The tactics, once named, become visible and therefore manageable. The hardest part is the betrayal – and the specific quality of this betrayal that makes it unlike any other.

Ordinary betrayal is comprehensible. An affair. A financial deception. A broken promise. It hurts, but you can understand it – weakness, temptation, selfishness. The betrayer is a person who did something wrong.

This betrayal is different. What you are discovering is not that they did something wrong. It is that the person you loved may not have existed in the form you understood. The warmth was a read, not a feeling. The connection was a strategy, not a bond. The promises were not broken – they were never real.

This is incomprehensible because your brain is wired for cooperation. You project your own emotional architecture onto others. When someone says “I love you,” your brain assumes the words carry the same weight they would if you said them. The extraction-wired use the same words with different software running underneath. They are not lying in the way you understand lying. They are operating a fundamentally different system whilst using the same interface.

You will circle this. For weeks, for months, your mind will return to specific moments and try to reconcile what you felt with what you now understand. Were any of the good times real? Did they feel anything? Was any of it genuine?

The honest answer is: some of it may have been. The extraction-wired are not empty vessels. They have preferences, pleasures, moments of genuine engagement. But the architecture that produces lasting emotional bonds in you operates differently in them. What felt like a foundation to you was a phase to them.

You will not resolve this by thinking about it. Accept the incomprehensibility. It is not a puzzle you failed to solve. It is a puzzle with missing pieces – missing because the other person’s internal experience is genuinely different from yours in ways that cannot be fully bridged.

3. What It Has Done to You

The extraction pattern produces specific, measurable effects on your mind and body. Understanding them is not self-pity. It is reconnaissance. You need to know what you are recovering from.

Your memory

Chronic stress shrinks the hippocampus – the brain region responsible for memory formation and retrieval. If your memory has become unreliable, if you struggle to recall sequences of events, if periods of your life feel foggy or missing – this is not ageing and it is not imagination. It is a neurological consequence of sustained psychological abuse. The memory recovers. It takes time and it takes safety, but the hippocampus has demonstrated capacity for regrowth once the stress source is removed.

Your concentration

You cannot focus. You start tasks and forget what you were doing. You read the same paragraph three times. Your mind is consumed by the situation – replaying conversations, anticipating the next conflict, running scenarios. This is hypervigilance. Your threat detection system is running at maximum capacity, leaving little bandwidth for anything else.

Your body

Chronic exhaustion that sleep doesn’t fix. Stomach problems. Headaches. Chest pain. Disrupted sleep – either inability to sleep or sleeping excessively. Weight change. Skin problems. Muscle tension, particularly in the jaw, shoulders and back. Your doctor may not connect these to your relationship. You should.

Your identity

You have become smaller. The things you used to enjoy – hobbies, friendships, ambitions – have contracted. You make yourself less visible, less opinionated, less present. You monitor your own behaviour constantly, adjusting to avoid triggering conflict. You have learned to make yourself small because small is safe.

This is not who you are. This is who the architecture made you.

Your trust

You don’t trust your own perception. You don’t trust your own memory. You don’t trust your own judgement – because how could you, when your judgement chose this person? The erosion of self-trust is the deepest damage the pattern inflicts, and it is the last thing to recover. Be patient with it.

4. What Makes You Vulnerable

You were not targeted because you are weak. You were targeted because of specific strengths the pattern needed to exploit.

Your empathy. You feel what others feel. This is what makes you a good friend, a good parent, a good human being. It is also what makes you unable to walk away from someone who appears to be suffering. The extraction-wired calibrate their suffering to your empathy with precision.

Your good faith. You extend the benefit of the doubt because that is how cooperation works. Every time you thought “maybe I’m being unfair” or “perhaps they didn’t mean it that way,” your good faith was doing what it evolved to do. The pattern exploits this by making each individual extraction just deniable enough to trigger your doubt.

Your loyalty. You stay. You keep trying. You believe in the potential you saw at the beginning. This loyalty – this capacity for sustained commitment – is what the maintenance phase exploits. The improvement arrives just when your loyalty is about to break. Not because they are changing. Because they are recalibrating.

Your need to be fair. You question yourself before you question them. You look for your own contribution to the problem. You consider their perspective, their difficulties, their history. This fairness is weaponised: they will always have a reason, an explanation, a context that makes your concern seem unreasonable.

Your shame. You haven’t told anyone the full truth because you are ashamed. Ashamed that you let it happen. Ashamed that you stayed. Ashamed that you still love someone who is harming you. The shame keeps you isolated, and isolation is the primary condition the pattern needs to operate.

Every one of these is a strength. Every one of these is what built civilisation. The pattern targets them because they are threats to it. Your vulnerability is your humanity.

5. How to Protect Yourself

The graduated response matches your protection to your situation. Not every situation requires the same approach. Start with the least disruptive and escalate as needed.

Grey rock

Become boring. Unrewarding. Emotionally flat. Complete sentences, zero engagement, nothing to extract. Grey rock works because extraction requires your reaction. Drama needs fuel. Without your emotional response, the interaction produces nothing of value for them. They will escalate initially – behavioural research calls this an **extinction burst**. When a behaviour that used to produce results stops working, it intensifies before it decreases. Expect 3–7 days of peak intensity, with the full process taking 3–6 months. The escalation is evidence the method is working. Hold your ground.

Broken record

Choose your position and repeat it, calmly, without variation, regardless of what they say. “I’m not going to discuss this further.” “My decision is made.” “I’ve already answered that.” The word salad works by pulling you off course. The broken record keeps you on course. You do not need to win the argument. You need to hold your boundary.

Structured communication

If you must communicate – because of shared children, shared business, shared obligations – move everything to writing. Email. Text. A co-parenting app. Writing defeats gaslighting (there is a record), defeats word salad (you can stay on topic), defeats DARVO (the reversal is visible in the thread). Keep messages brief, factual and unemotional. Answer what needs answering. Ignore what doesn’t.

The 72-hour rule

Never respond to a provocation in the moment. Wait 72 hours. The urgency you feel is manufactured. The crisis that requires an immediate response almost never does. Waiting allows your cortisol to drop, your clarity to return, and the provocation to reveal itself for what it is. The angry email you draft at 2am is never the email you should send.

Low contact

Structured interaction with documented boundaries. Not “I’ll set better boundaries” – that is unenforceable. Specific, concrete, documentable. “I will respond to messages about the children within 24 hours. I will not respond to messages about other topics.” The boundary is a wall, not a suggestion.

No contact

Complete separation. No calls, no messages, no checking their social media. No contact is not cruelty. It is architecture. Some patterns cannot be contained at close range. The boundary must remain absolute. Every exception resets the clock.

The information diet

If you are still living with the extractor while preparing to leave, restrict what you share in this order. **First: stop sharing your emotions and internal states** – they use what you feel to calibrate their response. **Second: stop sharing goals and plans.** Third: reduce opinions to neutral (“That’s interesting”, “We’ll see”). Fourth: stop revealing who you are confiding in. Fifth: stop sharing financial information. Sixth: reduce logistical detail. They will notice the withdrawal – emotional changes register first, schedule changes last. Move slowly.

6. The Impulses You Need to Resist

Living inside the extraction pattern teaches your nervous system responses that were adaptive inside the relationship and are destructive outside it. You will carry these impulses after leaving. Recognising them is the first step to unlearning them.

The impulse to explain. You have spent months or years justifying your perspective, proving your reality, building the case that what you experienced was real. This impulse will follow you. You will over-explain to friends, to therapists, to new partners. You do not need to prove your reality any more. The people who see you will not require proof.

The impulse to check. Their social media. Their movements. What they are saying about you. This feels like vigilance. It is re-engagement. Every time you check, you are handing them your attention. Block. Mute. Delete. The information you are seeking will not help you.

The impulse to rescue. They are in crisis. They are suffering. They need you. This is the Hoover – the attempt to pull you back. It may be genuine distress. It is still not your responsibility. You cannot rescue someone from architecture they will not leave.

The impulse to make them understand. If you could just explain it clearly enough, they would see what they have done. They would feel remorse. They would change. This is your good faith projecting your emotional architecture onto someone wired differently. They may understand perfectly. Understanding is not the problem. Feeling is.

The impulse to minimise. “It wasn’t that bad.” “Other people have it worse.” “Maybe I’m overreacting.” This is the gaslighting still running inside you after the source has been removed. Your experience was real. Your damage is real. Minimising it extends the period the pattern controls your self-perception.

The impulse to go back. Especially in the first months. The familiar pattern feels safer than the unfamiliar freedom. Loneliness feels worse than exploitation. This is withdrawal – neurological, not metaphorical. Intermittent reinforcement (the cycle of cruelty and kindness) dysregulates dopamine in the same pathways that make gambling addictive. Oxytocin released during reconciliation phases strengthens the bond even after harm. Practitioners estimate approximately 90 days of no contact for initial neurological recalibration. It passes. Hold your boundary until it does.

7. Protecting Children

If you have children with someone who has the extraction pattern, what follows will be the hardest section of this guide. There is no way to make it easy. There is a way to make it clear.

Children know. They may not have the vocabulary. They may not be able to articulate what they observe. But they feel the atmosphere. They track the micro-dynamics. They know which parent’s mood controls the household. They have been adapting to the pattern since before they could speak.

Do not use the children as allies. The temptation to confide in them, to recruit them, to share what you now understand – resist it. They are children. They need to be children. Positioning them between two parents damages them more than the pattern itself.

Do not disparage the other parent. Even when it is true. Even when they are disparaging you. Your dignity under pressure is the model your children need. They will work it out. Not now – it may take years. But they will see what you showed them and what the other parent showed them, and they will know the difference.

Build the safe house. Your home – or your time with them – needs to be the place where they do not have to perform, do not have to manage anyone’s emotions, do not have to be anything other than children. Consistency, calm and unconditional acceptance. That is the architecture they need from you.

Watch for parentification. Children of extractors often become carers – managing the parent’s emotions, mediating conflicts, taking responsibility that belongs to adults. If your child is doing this, they need support. A good child therapist who understands these dynamics is worth finding.

Accept the limits of your control. You cannot prevent what happens in their other home. You can only build what happens in yours. This is agonising and it is the reality. The architecture you build when they are with you matters more than you can measure right now.

8. The Mistakes Most People Make

These are not character flaws. They are predictable responses to an unprecedented situation. Knowing them in advance gives you the chance to avoid them.

Confronting too early. Telling them you know what they are before you are prepared. The pattern adapts faster than you do. Prepare first. Act from strength.

Hoping for a breakthrough. Sending them the book, the article, the diagnosis. Believing that if they could just see what they are doing, they would stop. They may see perfectly. They will not stop.

Couples therapy. Giving the extraction-wired a masterclass in your vulnerabilities in the presence of a therapist who often cannot tell the difference.

Telling everyone. Broadcasting your situation before you have secured your position. Telling the wrong people gives the pattern ammunition. Build your coalition carefully.

Engaging with the drama. Responding to provocations, defending yourself against accusations, arguing the facts. The drama is the trap. Grey rock. 72-hour rule. Broken record. Don’t engage on their terms.

Waiting for justice. Waiting for them to be held accountable, to be exposed, to face consequences. Justice may come. It may not. Your recovery cannot depend on it. Build your life. The best outcome is a life well lived, not a verdict.

Isolating yourself. Withdrawing because you are ashamed, exhausted or don’t want to burden others. Isolation is the condition the pattern needs. Your coalition is your protection. Use it.

Rushing into a new relationship. Seeking the warmth that was taken from you. Your vulnerability detector is still recalibrating. Give it time. The pattern specifically targets people in the aftermath of extraction because their need for reassurance overrides their caution.

Ignoring your phone. Shared Apple IDs, tracking apps, AirTags in your car or bag. GPS tracker use in coercive control cases rose 317% between 2018 and 2023. Check your phone for unfamiliar apps. Check your car – under seats, wheel arches, behind bumpers. If you share an Apple ID, they can see everything. Create a new one on a safe device. Change passwords in order: email first, then banking, then phone provider, then everything else. Download the **Bright Sky app** (disguised as a weather app) for secure evidence logging. For digital safety support: Refuge Tech Safety (refugetechsafety.org).

9. What Life Looks Like Afterwards

It gets better. Not smoothly. Not quickly. But genuinely, measurably, permanently better.

In the first month, you sleep. Properly. Perhaps for the first time in years. The hypervigilance begins to ease. You stop bracing for the next conflict. The silence in your home stops feeling threatening and starts feeling like peace.

In the first three months, your personality returns. Interests you forgot you had. Opinions you stopped expressing. Laughter that doesn't feel performative. Friends will tell you: you seem like yourself again. You won't recognise it yet. They will.

In the first six months, your judgement recovers. You start trusting your perception again. You stop second-guessing every decision. The fog clears. You begin to see the full scope of what happened – and whilst that is painful, it is also the foundation of genuine recovery.

In the first year, you rebuild. Not back to who you were – you cannot unknow what you now know. But forward, into someone who carries the recognition as protection rather than wound. You are harder to fool. Not cynical – calibrated. Your trust is no longer blind, but it is still generous. That generosity is yours. The pattern didn't take it.

After the first year, something unexpected: gratitude. Not for the experience – the experience was damage. But for the recognition. For the clarity. For the understanding of human dynamics that most people never acquire. You see patterns others miss. You protect people others can't. The worst thing that happened to you produced the most useful thing you know.

You survived the hardest part. The rest is architecture.

Where to Go Next

If you are in immediate danger: call 999 or the National Domestic Abuse Helpline on 0808 2000 247 (24 hours, free).

If you need support: visit www.trueregard.com/help for UK helplines, therapeutic resources and support organisations.

Also available free at www.trueregard.com: The Good Faith Problem · Recognising Covert Narcissism · Waking Up · Personal Protection Toolkit · Family Court Survival Guide · Professional Toolkits for HR, Legal, Education and Therapeutic settings.

The full framework: *The Extraction Pattern* and *The Capture: How They Stole America* by Vaughan Smith. Available at www.trueregard.com/the-books.

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THE EXTRACTION PATTERN

Vaughan Smith

The five per cent who design extraction. The ninety-five per cent who live inside it. The architecture that could contain it.

THE CAPTURE

Vaughan Smith

How They Stole America. The extraction pattern captured democracy, economy, healthcare, media and accountability – domain by domain.

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