

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE GRAY ROCK METHOD

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

This purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the literature that has been created and published by other authors. The paper is educational in nature and is not intended for distribution, publication, or commercial use. Material cited or quoted in this paper is limited to the purposes of commentary, criticism, reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research in psychology. The paper is designed to be educational in nature and it is not intended to provide professional advice. The reader is encouraged to contact a licensed mental health professional if professional advice, diagnostic consultation, or treatment is being sought.

As a starting point when discussing any conceptual model, it is important to remember the adage of British statistician George Box, Ph.D. (1953, Mathematics Genealogy, University of London) who wrote the famous line: “All models are wrong, but some are useful” (1979, p. 2). His point was that we should focus more on whether something can be applied to everyday life in a useful manner rather than debating endlessly whether an answer is correct in all cases.

Gray Rock Method

The Gray Rock Method is a technique used to deal with manipulative, narcissistic, or toxic individuals. The method simply involves deliberately acting as uninteresting and unengaged as a “gray rock” by offering brief, unemotional responses—depriving the difficult person of the dramatic reactions they crave.¹

Origin of the Term

According to Tim Lewis (2021), the term *gray rock method* appears to have originated in 2012 when an American mental health blogger, who wrote under the pseudonym Skylar, published a post titled “The Gray Rock Method of Dealing with Psychopaths” on a now-inactive website (180rule.com). Although the website is no longer active, the original post described how “psychopaths are addicted to drama, and they can’t stand to be bored”, and suggested becoming “as unresponsive as a rock” would cause a provoker to lose interest (Skylar, 2012). In situations where cutting off contact wasn’t possible, this boredom-inducing strategy could help a victim avoid being verbally manipulated.

Skylar’s (2012) method was simple: If an abusive, psychopathic, or narcissistic person thrives on provoking emotional reactions, then a useful response is for the other person to become as emotionally neutral and boring as a gray rock so that the would-be manipulator would lose interest in engaging.

According to science reporter Eric Dolan, “Its core insight – boring the abuser away – remains rooted in Skylar’s original observation that many abusers thrive on creating chaos and emotional reactions. Remove the payoff, and you remove their incentive to keep tormenting you” Dolan (2025, para. 11).

What the Gray Rock Method is Not

This method is not the same as extinction, cutting off, stonewalling, detachment, or positive influence.

Extinction. In Applied Behavior Analysis, based on operant theory, *extinction* refers to the process of *extinguishing* or eliminating a learned behavior by completely withholding the reinforcement that maintains the behavior. When a behavior no longer produces its expected payoff or reward, it gradually stops occurring.² In contrast, the gray rock method is not intended to extinguish behavior.

Cutting off. By whatever name it is called, *emotional cut-off* or *cutoff* is an extreme form of estrangement that involves the loss of a previously existing relationship between family members. Cutoff is based on emotional and/or physical distancing to the extent that there is negligible or no communication between the individuals involved for a prolonged period (e.g., a year or more). This concept was recognized by psychiatrist Murray Bowen (1976, 1978), a pioneer in Family Systems Theory. In normal development, young adults become independent from their families of origin in order to create families of their own, while also finding ways to maintain connection with their families of origin. In contrast to this healthy form of differentiation, a schism can disrupt this process of normal differentiation. This schism can result in avoidance, distancing, or estrangement. In Bowen's theory, avoidance and emotional cutoff are unhealthy coping mechanisms for dealing with anxiety and stress. In one sense, the fusion of intellectual and emotional processes involves emotional reasoning (see Doverspike, 2025, p. 1).

Stonewalling. Whereas the gray rock method involves limited neutral comments, *stonewalling* is an extreme form of distancing. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction by shutting down and closing himself or herself off from the other person. Often associated with *emotional flooding*,³ stonewalling occurs when a dyadic partner shuts down, closes off, and builds a wall. It is an extreme form of distancing and lack of responsiveness to the other partner. It is described by Gottman and Silver (1999) as the fourth and final of the four horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce.

Loving detachment. Although a person using the gray rock method might appear detached on the surface, genuine detachment involves a caring attitude that originates from below the surface and within the person. The gray rock method focuses on overt, external behavior, whereas loving detachment originates internally and is evidenced by inner balance and calm outward behavior.

Loving detachment—rather than “detaching with an axe”—can be effective when interacting with a manipulative or provocative person suffering from addiction or alcoholism: “Loving detachment involves detaching from the behaviors associated with the disease of alcoholism (e.g., anger, denial, lying, manipulation), not from the person who is loved” (Doverspike, 2025, p. 3). As suggested in one of Al-Anon's (1968) daily readers, “Detach from the problem, but not from the person” (p. 308).

It is not how to win friends and influence people. The gray rock method may be just the opposite. In his classic 1936 book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie (1981) makes the case that if a person genuinely cares about people, respects their dignity, and communicates with empathy, then that person will develop stronger relationships with others. Although some critics have argued that Carnegie's techniques are formulaic if applied mechanically, Carnegie himself emphasized that his suggestions should come from genuine interest in the other person rather than manipulation. In contrast to the idea of being boring while avoiding disclosure, Carnegie emphasized eternal and timeless communication skills—active listening, expressing appreciation, and empathizing with others.

When to Use the Gray Rock Method

The method is typically used when cutting ties (going “no-contact”) is not desirable or possible. Here are some common scenarios:

- ☑ Interacting with a difficult, overbearing, or narcissistic family member
- ☑ Dealing with a toxic coworker or boss
- ☑ Co-parenting with an ex-partner

When Not to Use the Gray Rock Method

The method is not intended to deepen and strengthen relationships with significant others. There are some scenarios in which it should not be used. These scenarios might include:

- ☑ Interacting with anxious or fearful friends or family members with whom more closeness and intimacy is desired
- ☑ Building, coaching, or managing an athletic or corporate team
- ☑ Communicating with a responsive spouse, partner, friend, or family member

Interpersonal Considerations and Risks

Like any activity, there are benefits and risks. Here are some risks of the gray rock method:

- ☑ It does not lead to the deepening and strengthening relationships.
- ☑ It does not promote closeness, intimacy, or self-disclosure.
- ☑ It does not help employees earn bonuses, promotions, or salary increases.

Safety Considerations and Risks

Like any technique or tool, there are some scenarios in which the gray rock method should not be used. Otherwise, there could be adverse consequences.

- ☒ It is not safe for dangerous situations. The method should not be used in situations that involve immediate danger, physical abuse, stalking behavior, or violence.
- ☒ It does not offer or provide a sense of safety or social support.
- ☒ It is intended only as a temporary coping mechanism—not as a permanent cure for a dysfunctional relationship.

Operant Considerations and Risks

Aside from the important safety concerns, there are some behavioral considerations associated with operant learning principles.

The Extinction Burst. When reinforcement is completely withheld, expect a sudden, temporary spike in the behavior’s frequency, duration, or intensity as the subject tests to see if the reward will return. When Person A stops reinforcing Person B’s abusive or narcissistic behavior with drama and emotional reactions, Person B’s behavior may temporarily escalate as that person tries harder to elicit a response.

Examples: The parents who stop paying attention to a child’s angry outburst or temper tantrums will notice that the tantrums initially become more frequent, more intense, or longer in duration. Unless they are internally or externally reinforced in some way, the tantrums will eventually decrease in frequency, intensity, or duration.⁴

Accidental Reward During Extinction.

Reinforcing a behavior during an extinction trial will most likely result in a Partial Reinforcement Effect.

Examples: A dog trainer may decide to extinguish some unwanted canine behaviors. However, if the trainer inadvertently happens to drop a cookie or treat during the extinction trials, then the dog will receive reinforcement that will result in an increase in the behavior that was reinforced. The dog trainer who happens to reinforce the dog for scratching at the back door will notice scratching at the door more often (frequency), with greater fervor (intensity), or for longer periods of time (duration).

The Partial Reinforcement Effect. Behaviors reinforced only some of the time (variable reinforcement) are much harder to extinguish than those reinforced every single time (continuous reinforcement). Variable schedules of reinforcement, such as Variable Ratio (VR) or Variable Interval (VI) are highly resistant to extinction. Because the reinforcement is unpredictable, the subject continues performing the behavior for a long time without a reward before realizing the contingencies have changed.

Examples: The classic example of a variable schedule of reinforcement is slot machines. Because a gambler never knows when the next payout will happen, the behavior (pulling the lever) persists incredibly strongly even when winning streaks end. A contemporary example of variable schedule of reinforcement would be social media. Because the viewer never knows when the next interesting picture or story will be seen, the behavior (clicking or swiping the screen) will persist even when the reinforcement interval is stretched so far that few interesting pictures or stories are encountered.

Response Variability. The subject (Person B in this case) may try altered variations of the behavior in an attempt to trigger the familiar reinforcement. It is different than response burst, which usually involves an initial increased frequency or intensity of behavior. In response variability, it is the types of behaviors that are different.

Examples: When this pattern occurs in dog training, the dog is said to be “offering behaviors” in an attempt to get a treat. It can also be seen in children—regardless of age—trying to receive attention from an important person (not necessarily a parent).

How to Use the Gray Rock Method

After considering the benefits and risks associated with the method, using it is simple. It requires paying attention to a few ideas.

Keep it brief. Limit conversations to the bare minimum. When responding, use brief, factual answers (e.g., “OK,” “I see,” “fine”).

Reduce emotion. Respond rather than react. Speak in a neutral tone and voice inflection. With most people, “A soft answer turns away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1). In contrast, a harsh or angry reply will certainly escalate conflict.

Avoid drama. Avoid expressing strong feelings like anger, excitement, or sadness, which can act as “fuel” for the fire of manipulators.

Be uninteresting. Be boring and avoid drama. Do not share personal details, opinions, or stories. Avoid being rude or disrespectful.

Avoid eye contact. Maintain neutral body language with minimal eye contact and keep the interaction as forgettable as possible.

Avoid jabbing back. Do not argue, defend yourself, or show visible frustration. Expressing frustration to someone who is provocative is like throwing chum to a shark.

Avoid JADE. Avoid justifying, arguing, defending, or explaining.

Don’t take the bait. Manipulative and provocative individuals often try to “bait” the other person into reacting emotionally.

Drop the rope. If you find yourself getting pulled into a tug-of-war, then drop the rope. It takes two to argue, so avoid rebuttals.

Minimize detail. Do not share personal opinions or deep feelings that can be used against you.

Deflect Focus. Keep the topic entirely focused on boring, mundane, or practical matters.

Resources

There are several authors who have published much more extensive information and opinions about the gray rock method. A few of them are listed below.

Dolan, E. W. (2025, March 19). *The grey rock method: A strategy to disarm narcissists and toxic people*. PsyPost. https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Eric Dolan is the founder, publisher, and editor of PsyPost, a science news publication dedicated to evidence-based reporting on psychology and neuroscience. Over a career spanning more than 15 years in science journalism, Eric has interviewed leading researchers from institutions around the world and his work has been cited by major media outlets. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois.

Wright, A. (2026, June 30). *The grey rock method: A deep guide to using it without losing yourself*. <https://anniewright.com/the-grey-rock-method-a-deep-guide-to-using-it-without-losing-yourself/>

Annie Wright is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) who is licensed in California, Connecticut, Washington DC, Florida, Maine, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

Notes

1. Because the concept originated in the US, the term *gray rock method* is usually considered to be the original form. However, both spellings are widely recognized and refer to the same communication strategy. In American English, the term is “gray” rock method. In British English (including most Commonwealth English), the term is “grey” rock method.

2. *Extinction* is the noun for the psychological principle or procedure that is used to eliminate a target behavior. *Extinguishing* is the verb that describes the action or process of making the target behavior decrease in frequency, intensity, duration, or context. At the same time, extinction is not the same as *punishment*. Punishment actively introduces an aversive consequence (e.g., electric shock, speeding ticket, a scolding), whereas extinction simply removes the rewarding consequences (e.g., attention) that are otherwise maintaining the behavior.

3. Emotional flooding, also known as Diffuse Physiological Arousal (DPA), is a state of nervous system activation that occurs during interpersonal conflict. Although Gottman and Katz (1989) discussed emotion-regulation research with children and parents, the first formal definition of the concept was introduced by Gottman (1993), who described flooding as the key mechanism in the “distance and isolation cascade” that was one of the predictors of marital decline. Gottman defined flooding as occurring when “the partner’s negative emotions are unexpected, unprovoked, intense, overwhelming, and disorganizing” (1993, p. 64).

Gottman argued that once a person becomes flooded, the person becomes motivated to escape the interaction. Gottman believed the concept of flooding helped explain behaviors such as withdrawal and what he later termed *stonewalling*. Physiological arousal, including sympathetic nervous system activation and an elevated heart rate typically above 100 beats per minute, is central to the concept. At this point, it is speculated, a person’s fight-or-flight response activates, rendering empathy, rational thinking, and problem-solving extremely difficult if not impossible.

4. Temper tantrums should not be confused with “autistic meltdowns” and anger outbursts should not be confused with “sensory shielding.” Although this paper is designed to be educational in nature and it is not designed for diagnosis or clinical management of any condition, here is a major difference in how attention may or may serve as positive reinforcement: In temper tantrums and anger outburst, attention can be reinforcing (e.g., the child checks parents for attention or engagement). In autistic meltdowns and sensory shielding, generally attention has no effect or it may even exacerbate the behavior if the attention increases stress (Doverspike, 2005, Sl. 289–290).

References

When an original publication date and a last updated date are provided, APA Style uses the last updated date. If the more current date is “last reviewed” instead of “last updated,” APA Style uses the original publication date (since the review may not have changed the content).

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. (1968). *One day at a time in Al-Anon* [B-6]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.

Bowen, M. (1976). Theory in the practice of psychotherapy. In P. J. Guerin (Ed.), *Family therapy*. New York: Gardner.

Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.

Box, G. E. P. (1976, December). Science and statistics. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 71(356), 791–799.

George Edward Pelham Box (1919-2013) earned a doctorate in Mathematics at the University of London in 1953. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) and a British statistician who worked in the areas of quality control, time-series analysis, design of experiments, and Bayesian inference. He has been called one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century.

Under Section 2.3 (Parsimony): “Since all models are wrong the scientist cannot obtain a “correct” one by excessive elaboration” (Box, 1976, p. 792).

Under Section 2.4 (Worrying Selectively): “Since all models are wrong the scientist must be alert to what is importantly wrong” (Box, 1976, p. 792).

Box, G. E. P. (1979). Robustness in the strategy of scientific model building. In R. L. Launer & G. N. Wilkinson (Eds.), *Robustness in statistics* (pp. 201–236). Academic Press.

The quote is on page 202 of this paper: “All models are wrong, but some are useful” (Box, 1979, p. 202).

Carnegie, D. (1981). *How to win friends & influence people* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Pocket Books. (Original edition published October 1936).

Dolan, E. W. (2025, March 19). *The grey rock method: A strategy to disarm narcissists and toxic people*. PsyPost. https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Eric Dolan is the founder, publisher, and editor of PsyPost, an online science news publication dedicated to evidence-based reporting on psychology and neuroscience. During a career spanning more than 15 years in science journalism, Eric has interviewed leading researchers from institutions around the world and his work has been cited by major media outlets. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois.

Doverspike, W. F. (2005, January 10). *Psychopathology* [PowerPoint slides]. Atlanta, GA: Psychological Studies Institute (accredited as Richmond Graduate University since 2009).

- Doverspike, W. F. (2025, September 22). *How to understand Al-Anon: Detachment and letting go*.
<https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how-to-understand-al-anon-detachment-and-letting-go.pdf>
- Doverspike, W. F. (2025, October 01). *How to understand estrangement*.
<https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how-to-understand-estrangement.pdf>
- Gottman, J. M. (1993). A theory of marital dissolution and stability. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 7(1), 57–75.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.7.1.57>
- Gottman, J. M., & Katz, L. F. (1989). Effects of marital discord on young children's peer interaction and health. *Developmental Psychology*, 25(3), 373–381.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.25.3.373>
- Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Lewis, T. (2021, December 27). 'Grey Rocking': The life-improving power of being really, really boring.
<https://www.esquire.com/uk/life/a38473153/grey-rock-technique->
 Tim Lewis is a UK writer and journalist based in London, England. He has written extensively for *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, and *Esquire UK*, and has also authored the 2013 book *Land of the Second Chances*.
- Lewis, T. (2014). *Land of second chances: The impossible rise of Rwanda's cycling team*. Yellow Jersey Press.
 This book was not cited in this paper. It is listed here only because it is cited in the previous reference entry.
- Skylar. (2012). *The gray rock method of dealing with psychopaths* [Blog post].
<https://180rule.com>
- Wright, A. (2026, June 30). *The grey rock method: A deep guide to using it without losing yourself*.
<https://anniewright.com/the-grey-rock-method-a-deep-guide-to-using-it-without-losing-yourself/>
 Annie Wright is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) who is licensed in California, Connecticut, Washington DC, Florida, Maine, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

Correct Citation for Reference Entry

The reference entry correct citation styles for this document are illustrated below. Students should defer to the style preferences of their individual course instructors to determine whether the course instructor has preferences that are more specific than those shown below:

American Psychological Association

Doverspike, W. F. (2026). *How to understand the gray rock method*. <https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Chicago Manual of Style / Kate Turabian

Doverspike, William, "How to Understand the Gray Rock Method." July 01, 2026. <https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Note: According to the Chicago Manual of Style, blog posts are typically not included in bibliographies, but can be cited in the running text and/or notes. However, if a blog is cited frequently, you may include it in the bibliography.

Modern Language Association

Doverspike, William, "How to Understand the Gray Rock Method." 01 July 2026. <https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Note: MLA guidelines assume that readers can track down most online sources by entering the author, title, or other identifying information in a search engine or a database. Consequently, MLA does not require a URL in citations for online sources such as websites. However, some instructors still ask for it, so check with your instructor to determine his or her preference.

Documentation

This document is cross-referenced to a portable document file (PDF) published from this Word document file: How to Understand the Gray Rock Method.doc

Server path:

https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_the_gray_rock_method.pdf

Server file name:

[how_to_understand_the_gray_rock_method.pdf](#)

Website tab: Practice [Popular Articles]

Link name: How to Understand Gray Rock Method

Workshop Presentation Deck:

N/A

Webinar Presentation Deck:

N/A

Workshop Handouts:

N/A

Published July 01, 2026 | Updated July 01, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.
Content and references last reviewed 2026

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2026). *How to understand the gray rock method*. <https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>