

Lesson 1: Stop Solving Your Ex, See the Pattern Instead

When someone provokes you, criticises you, or turns a simple parenting message into a fight, it's natural to want a name for it. *Are they just difficult? Toxic? A narcissist?* A label feels like it promises clarity.

Here's the shift this lesson offers: **you don't need to diagnose your ex to change how you respond to them.**

Difficult behaviour, high-conflict patterns, narcissistic traits, and Narcissistic Personality Disorder are not the same thing. NPD is a clinical diagnosis, and it isn't your job to hand one out from a string of texts. Your job is to recognise what's happening in front of you and choose the response that serves you and your children.

As you go through this lesson, keep coming back to one question: **"What response serves me and my children?"** Every time you catch yourself analysing your ex instead, return to it.

By the end, you'll be shifting from *diagnosing the person* to *recognising the pattern*, looking at observable behaviour, its effect on you, and your options, rather than needing to establish exactly what your ex is. You don't have to solve them to protect your peace.

Stop Solving the Person, Start Seeing the Pattern

High-conflict co-parenting often comes with a constant mental investigation: *Why would they say that? Are they trying to upset me? Do they even believe what they're accusing me of?*

These questions drain you because they ask you to solve something you can't know for certain: someone else's internal motives. You can observe behaviour and describe what happened, but you can't read minds. When your peace depends on finally discovering *why*, you stay stuck in analysis.

Say you get this message: *"You're unbelievable. Once again you've failed to organise anything properly. The kids always suffer because of your selfishness. Have you actually remembered their school bags this time?"*

Your mind might jump to the character attack, start collecting counter-evidence, or feel compelled to correct the record, and suddenly a question about school bags has become an argument about who's the better parent.

Pattern recognition asks three different things: *What actually happened?* (Criticism attached to a practical question.) *What effect does it have on me?* (Chest tight, anger, the urge to defend.) *What actually needs my attention?* (The school bags.)

That shift matters, because you no longer need to answer *"what kind of person sends a message like this"* before deciding what to do.

This is also why it helps not to treat every difficult moment as proof of a personality disorder. Separation brings out anger, defensiveness, and inconsistency in people without any of that meeting the bar for a diagnosis, and diagnosis belongs with a qualified professional anyway. The more useful question for this course is simpler: are you experiencing **patterns that repeatedly pull you into unnecessary conflict or activation?**

Try trading this:

"My ex is a narcissist, so they sent that to manipulate me."

for this:

“This message has an accusation attached to a parenting question. The accusation activates me. The question may need an answer.”

Notice what you haven’t done: you haven’t excused the behaviour, agreed with the accusation, or decided it’s acceptable. You’ve simply stopped requiring certainty about motive before choosing your own response.

Now try it yourself. Think of one interaction that stayed in your head longer than you wanted. Describe it like a camera would, not like a psychologist would: What was said or done? What happened next? What did you feel? What did you do? What happened after? This separates the observable event from the story your activated mind builds around it.

You’re not removing your humanity from the situation, you’re giving yourself more choice, because you can’t control their behaviour, but **you can change your participation in the pattern.**

The Three Questions That Bring the Focus Back to You

Once diagnosis stops being the centre of the problem, you need something to replace it, or your mind will drift straight back to “why are they doing this.” From here on, practise these three questions instead:

What pattern is happening? Stay with observable behaviour: practical conversations turning personal, accusations tacked onto ordinary requests, demands for an instant reply to something that isn’t urgent, old arguments resurfacing in current ones. You don’t need to know *why* the pattern exists to recognise that it does.

What effect is it having on me? Get curious about your own activation instead of ashamed of it. Does your heart race? Do you start typing immediately? Do you spend the next three hours mentally arguing with a message that took thirty seconds to send? A message can take twenty seconds to read and cost you your whole evening. Naming that cost isn’t weakness, it’s information.

What response serves me and my children? Notice what this question is *not*: not “*what will make them realise they’re wrong,*” not “*what will make them apologise,*” not “*what will finally stop this.*” Those all require control over someone else that you don’t have. Sometimes a response is genuinely needed. Sometimes it can wait. Sometimes only one factual line needs answering. Sometimes nothing needs to be said at all.

One important exception: if you’re dealing with a child safety issue, threats, harassment, abuse, or anything requiring legal, medical, or safeguarding support, Grey Rock is a communication strategy, not a safety plan. Get the right professional help.

For ordinary high-conflict messages, try the three questions on this one: “*You clearly don’t care about the children’s routine. You always make everything difficult. I need to know whether you’re dropping them off at six.*”

Pattern: a practical question buried in criticism.

Effect: defensive, wanting to list everything you do.

Response that serves you: address only the practical part, “Yes, I’ll drop them off at six.”

Compare that to: “*How dare you say I don’t care about their routine? I’m constantly rearranging my life because you change plans last minute. Maybe look at your own behaviour before criticising mine.*” It might be true. It might feel good to send. But does it move the actual parenting matter forward?

Feel what you feel. Send only what is necessary. You’re not being asked to stop feeling things, just to treat feeling something and sending it as two separate decisions.

Practise this on one recent interaction and write your answers down. The goal isn't a perfect response, it's training yourself to notice the space between what your ex does and what you choose to do next. **That space is where your peace starts becoming yours again.**

Action Steps

1. Complete your **High-Conflict Co-Parent Pattern Check**, a pattern-recognition exercise, not a diagnostic tool for your ex.
2. Pick one interaction that left you activated and write down only the observable facts, no assumptions about motive.
3. Ask: **What pattern is happening?** Name the observable behaviour.
4. Ask: **What effect is it having on me?** Note the emotional, physical, and time cost.
5. Ask: **What response serves me and my children?** Separate what genuinely needs a reply from what's just the urge to defend or prove yourself.
6. For the next few days, notice whenever your mind asks "why are they doing this," and use it as your cue to run the three questions instead.
7. Keep this somewhere visible: **You cannot control their behaviour. You can change your participation in the pattern.**

You Did It!

You've just made one of the biggest shifts in the GREY ROCK RECOVERY™: moving your attention off solving another person and onto recognising the pattern in front of you. That's simple on paper and genuinely hard in practice, especially if you've spent years trying to understand your ex's motives. That's okay. You're not aiming for perfect overnight, just for noticing sooner when your attention has drifted somewhere powerless, and bringing it back somewhere useful.

Your three questions:

What pattern is happening?

What effect is it having on me?

What response serves me and my children?

Before the next lesson, catch yourself asking *why* your ex is doing something, and instead of answering it, run the situation through those three questions. Notice whether you feel even slightly less compelled to solve them, and whether your response gets shorter, calmer, or easier to delay.

That's the win here, not that difficult communication disappears, but that you now have another option besides walking straight into the argument. You can feel hurt without defending yourself. You can notice criticism without answering it. You can see a pattern without diagnosing a person.

One question remains: even once you understand the pattern, why can a single message still hook you instantly? In the next lesson, **Recognise the Lure**, we'll look at the different hooks, guilt, anger, fear, urgency, character attacks, pressure through other people, so you can spot the lure before you bite.