

The Work of Dr Peter Salerno

PATHOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS, PERSONALITY & RECOVERY

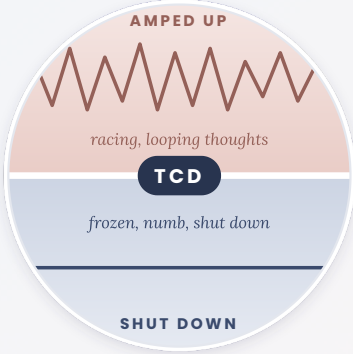
A summary of the books and key ideas of Peter Salerno, PsyD — licensed psychotherapist and trauma specialist

Dr Salerno specialises in the assessment of personality pathology and in recovery from what he calls *pathological relationship abuse*. He is trained in trauma treatment, including EMDR, and in the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised. His books aim to help survivors and clinicians make sense of manipulative relationships and heal from them.

His Books at a Glance From trauma recovery to personality science

2021	2024	2025	RECENT	RECENT
Fit For Off-Duty Healing from work-related trauma for firefighters and their families.	The Nature and Nurture of Narcissism Narcissistic personality through gene-environment interaction.	Traumatic Cognitive Dissonance Healing from an abusive relationship with a disordered personality.	Cruelty by Nature The science of intentional, instrumental abuse.	The Social Predator's Secret Playbook Traits, tactics and phases of predatory relationships.

Traumatic Cognitive Dissonance The term Salerno introduced — his central idea



AT THE SAME TIME

"Amped Up" and "Shut Down"

In Salerno's description, traumatic cognitive dissonance is a trauma response to ongoing manipulation, gaslighting, deception and emotional coercion — often within a relationship with someone showing marked personality pathology.

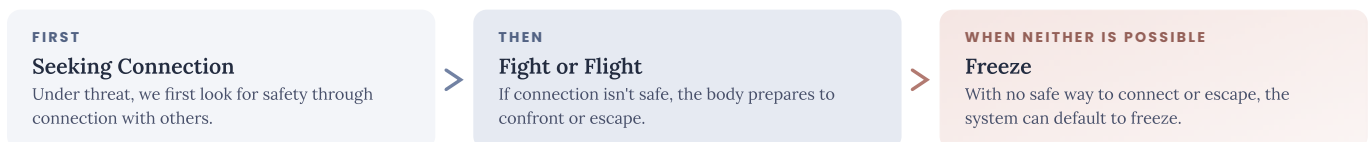
He describes it as more than ordinary confusion: a painful internal contradiction in which people come to doubt their memory, perception and judgement, and can feel over-alert and emotionally frozen at once. He frames it as a form of complex relational trauma.

Truth manipulation
 Gaslighting
 Covert coercion
 Reality distortion
 Self-blame

Experiences He Describes Common features of TCD in his work — not a diagnostic checklist

● Racing, looping thoughts about the relationship	● Feeling frozen , numb or detached	● Chronic indecision and self-doubt	● Intense guilt , shame or self-blame
● Losing a sense of who you are	● Replaying conversations and arguments	● Confusion about your true feelings	● Exhaustion , poor sleep and fatigue
● Intrusive images or vivid nightmares	● Feeling like a fraud or a failure	● Isolation , despite wanting connection	● Overwhelm that can feel unbearable

Why You May Feel Frozen Salerno's nervous-system explanation

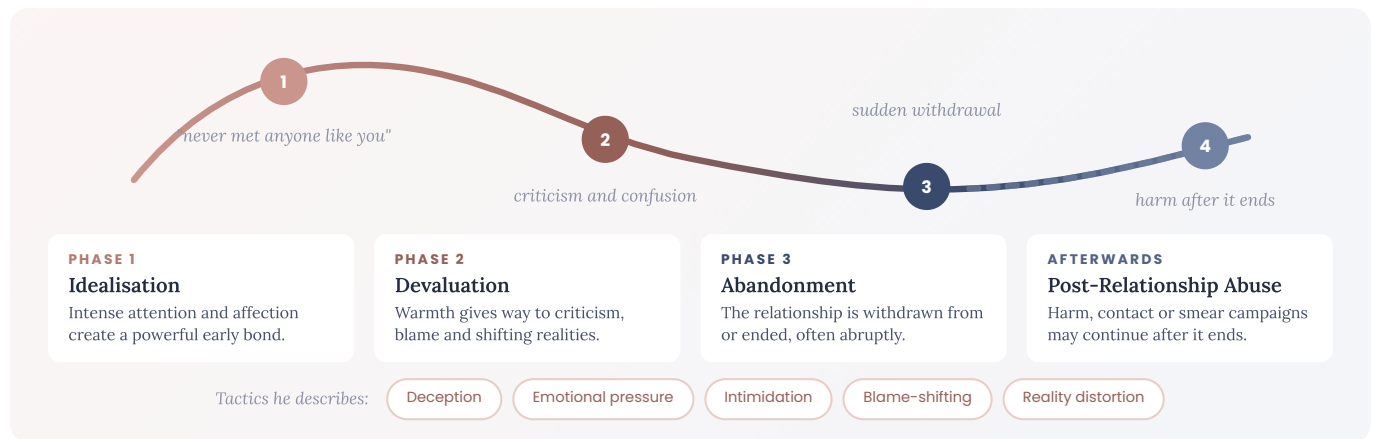


He frames this freeze as a survival adaptation, not a weakness. The model draws on polyvagal-informed ideas, which are influential in trauma therapy but still debated in research.

Core Messages Across His Work Recurring themes, paraphrased

It was not your fault Manipulation can leave people believing they are to blame, even when they are not.	It doesn't always "take two" In pathological relationships, conflict is not always mutual or equally shared.	Knowledge is where healing starts Naming what happened is a first step toward clarity and recovery.
--	--	---

The Pattern of Predatory Relationships From *The Social Predator's Secret Playbook*



On Personality and Harm Two of his more distinctive arguments

THE NATURE AND NURTURE OF NARCISSISM

Not Simply the Result of Trauma

Salerno argues that narcissistic personality disorder is widely – and in his view wrongly – explained as the product of childhood trauma. He emphasises inherited temperament interacting with environment.

- Understanding causes should not excuse harmful behaviour
- Survivors deserve accurate information about what they faced

CRUELTY BY NATURE

When Harm Is Intentional

He challenges the idea that all harmful behaviour is "hurt people hurting people", arguing that some abuse is consistent, deliberate and linked to stable personality traits and biology.

- Some tactics persist because they work for the person using them
- Recognising patterns can help survivors protect themselves

Reading His Work Carefully A balanced clinical perspective

POINTS TO HOLD IN MIND

Useful Insights, Held With Nuance

- TCD is a descriptive concept from clinical practice, not a formal diagnosis in DSM-5 or ICD-11.
- Personality disorders can only be diagnosed through careful assessment by a qualified clinician.
- Research suggests narcissism arises from both genetic and environmental influences, including parenting.
- Some readers find his firm language validating; others feel it may add to stigma. Views differ.

Paths Toward Recovery Themes from his trauma-informed approach



Knowledge first

Understanding what happened can reduce confusion and self-blame.



Validate your experience

Your perceptions matter, even when they were denied.



Settle the nervous system

Grounding and regulation help thaw the freeze.



Protect your space

Limiting contact, where safe, can reduce ongoing confusion.



Rebuild self-trust

Gradually relearning to rely on your own judgement.



Trauma-informed support

Therapy, such as EMDR, can help process what happened.

Reflection For personal reflection or to explore in therapy

01

WHERE HAVE I LEARNED TO DOUBT MY OWN PERCEPTIONS?

02

WHAT HELPS ME FEEL STEADY AND CLEAR IN MY BODY?

03

WHAT IS ONE SMALL WAY I COULD TRUST MYSELF THIS WEEK?



If you are being harmed, feel unsafe, or feel overwhelmed to the point of not wanting to go on, please contact local emergency services, a crisis line or a domestic abuse service. You deserve safety and support.

SOURCES

Salerno, P. (2021). *Fit For Off-Duty*.
 Salerno, P. (2024). *The Nature and Nurture of Narcissism*.
 Salerno, P. (2025). *Traumatic Cognitive Dissonance: Healing From an Abusive Relationship With a Disordered Personality*.
 Salerno, P. *Cruelty by Nature; The Social Predator's Secret Playbook*.

Salerno, P. *Traumatic Cognitive Dissonance* [author website], drpetersalerno.com.
 Luo, Y. L. L., Cai, H., & Song, H. (2014). A behavioral genetic study of intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of narcissism. *PLoS ONE*, 9(4), e93403.

Brummelman, E., et al. (2015). Origins of narcissism in children. *PNAS*, 112(12), 3659–3662.
 Porges, S. W. (2011). *The Polyvagal Theory*. Norton.