

NarcSafe

The Thinking Behind the Tool

A Philosophy & Ethics Document

This document is not a user manual. NarcSafe does not need one — the tool is self-evident to the person it was built for. What this document captures is the thinking that precedes the design: the design decisions that look like small UX choices but are actually ethical stances; the things NarcSafe refuses to do and why; and the metacognitive frame that holds the whole thing together.

It is written for researchers, clinical partners, and anyone who needs to understand not just what NarcSafe is, but why it is the way it is.

— *Dr. Sharada Rao, Founder, Svayam*

1 The Problem NarcSafe Is Solving

The surface problem is narcissistic and emotional abuse. The deeper design problem is this: how do you build a tool for someone who may not yet have language for what they are living, who may be actively surveilled, who may not believe their own perceptions, and who may not be safe?

Most mental health tools are built on an assumption of epistemic safety — the user knows what they're experiencing, they have privacy, and they are free to act on what they discover. For a survivor of narcissistic abuse, none of these assumptions hold.

Narcissistic abuse systematically dismantles a person's relationship with their own perception. Gaslighting, love bombing, devaluation, the silent treatment, and intermittent reinforcement are not merely unpleasant — they are techniques that restructure how a person relates to their own mind. The survivor often arrives without the vocabulary for what happened. The tool must meet her there.

The first thing coercive control takes away is the language to name what is happening. NarcSafe does not ask her to name it first.

Additionally, the device in the survivor's hand is often not safe. A partner who monitors location, reads messages, or checks browser history turns every tool into a potential source of evidence to be used against her. NarcSafe was designed with this knowledge built in from the first line of code.

2 Design Principles

Seven principles govern every design decision in NarcSafe. They are not aspirational — they are structural.

I. The device is not safe.

All data lives on the user's device. No cloud, no sync, no server, no account, no email address. Nothing can be subpoenaed, hacked, or handed over. Nothing is transmitted. The tool leaves no trace outside the browser's local storage — which the user can clear at any time. This is not a privacy feature. It is a survival architecture.

II. Language is not given — it is discovered.

The Patterns glossary does not tell the user what happened to her. It offers vocabulary and lets her recognise her own experience in it. The Reality Check does not diagnose — it asks questions that help her find her own clarity. The Tests are self-assessments, not clinical instruments. The tool escorts her toward language without delivering a verdict.

III. Every stage of a survivor's journey is equally valid.

Find Your Way offers five paths: recovering, coping, confused, wanting to stay and cope, wanting to leave and survive. The tool does not rank these. It does not point toward leaving as the goal. It points each stage toward what often helps — and uses 'often', not 'will'. A survivor who is confused is not a failed survivor. A survivor who wants to stay is not making a wrong choice. The tool holds them all.

IV. The tool cannot be weaponised against its own user.

The Patterns page opens with: 'If anyone other than you is reading this, please close the tab.' The Reality Check notes: 'This is for your own clarity, not for showing to anyone.' These are not disclaimers — they are protective design. An abuser shown the Reality Check output could use it to argue, deflect, or escalate. The tool anticipates this and guards against it explicitly.

V. The body knows before the mind does.

Bilateral stimulation, tai chi postures, box breathing, grounding — these are not supplementary features. They are foregrounded because somatic regulation often precedes cognitive clarity in trauma recovery. The nervous system, offered something to track, softens what it was holding. The body is given tools before the mind is asked to make sense of anything.

VI. Small acts of autonomy compound.

LiveMyDay lists the most fundamental daily anchors — brushed teeth, ate something, bathed, slept — without naming why they are hard. CRAFT builds a five-step daily ritual for reclaiming selfhood. These are not productivity tools. They are the slow recovery of agency, one small act at a time. Autonomy, once taken, is rebuilt this way.

VII. Exit is present but not prescribed.

Safety & Exit is one of eleven tabs — not the home screen. The tool does not frame leaving as the goal of recovery. It frames safety as the goal. For a survivor still in the relationship, this is the difference between a tool that meets her and a tool that shames her for staying. When she is ready for Safety & Exit, it is thorough, India-specific, and foregrounded with the sentence that matters most: 'Do not announce.'

3 The Features as Design Decisions

Each feature in NarcSafe carries a design decision inside it. The following notes explain not what each feature does — that is visible — but why it was designed the way it was.

Find Your Way

The five stages are listed without hierarchy. The language is 'what often helps' — not 'what will help', not 'what you should do'. Epistemic humility is load-bearing here. A tool that overpromises in this context is a tool that can be used against the survivor by an abuser who says: 'See? Your app said you'd be fine.'

LiveMyDay

The checklist items are the most basic acts of self-care: teeth, food, bath, sleep, some movement, some stillness. They are not explained. The knowledge that these become hard under trauma is held in the design itself — invisible to anyone who doesn't need it, immediately recognisable to anyone who does. This is design as companionship.

Scripts

Scripts for Partner and Scripts for Parents. The introduction notes: 'These are starting points, not lines you have to deliver exactly... sometimes silence is the script.' This acknowledgement — that sometimes the right response is no response — is rare in communication tools and essential here. Pressure to speak, perform clarity, or confront can itself be a harm.

Bilateral Calm

The copy describes what the practice does without overclaiming what it is: 'Your nervous system, watching something cross back and forth, often softens what it was holding too tightly.' The disclaimer is immediate: 'This is a calming practice, not a trauma therapy.' The practice is offered with appropriate clinical humility — powerful enough to be useful, honest enough to not replace care.

Reality Check

'This is for your own clarity, not for showing to anyone.' This sentence protects the user from herself — from the impulse to prove, to convince, to show the AI's output to the person who caused the harm. That impulse is a documented feature of trauma bonding. The tool anticipates it and declines to enable it.

Safe Log

The pattern tags — gaslighting, silent treatment, love bombing, devaluation, Hoover, rage, financial, threat — offer vocabulary without forcing categorisation. The note that the log may eventually be useful for 'clarity, therapy, or legal records' is significant. The legal records framing is rarely present in wellness apps. Its presence here acknowledges that what is being recorded has real-world weight.

Patterns

'If anyone other than you is reading this, please close the tab.' This warning is the most explicit anti-weaponisation design decision in the app. The glossary of abuse dynamics is information that could be misused — an abuser reading it could refine their techniques, or use the survivor's awareness of patterns as evidence of paranoia. The warning is a structural protection.

Safety & Exit

India-specific: the Domestic Violence Act 2005, Sakhi One Stop Centres, Women's Helpline 181, legal rights. The note 'Survivors in the highest danger are often those who have just announced an intent to leave' is placed at the top, not buried. 'Do not announce' is the most important sentence in the entire app. It is foregrounded. The PDF download allows offline access when connectivity cannot be trusted.

The Exit Button

Always visible. One tap returns to the home screen. This is not a UX convenience — it is a safety feature. A survivor whose partner enters the room unexpectedly needs to be able to close the tool immediately, without it looking like she was hiding something.

4 What NarcSafe Refuses

A product's refusals define it as much as its features. NarcSafe refuses the following:

X It refuses to tell you what to do.

The tool offers, points, and supports. It does not prescribe. A survivor who has had her decision-making systematically undermined does not need another voice telling her what the right choice is.

X It refuses to name your situation for you.

The Reality Check, the Tests, the Patterns glossary — all of these escort the user toward language without delivering a diagnosis. The naming must come from her, not from the tool.

X It refuses to store your data anywhere but your device.

Not because data privacy is a feature to be marketed, but because the alternative — any cloud storage, any account, any transmitted data — creates a vulnerability that could be used against her.

X It refuses to presume you want to leave.

Leaving is not the goal of the tool. Safety is. These are not the same thing. A tool that treats leaving as the obvious correct answer fails the survivor who is not ready, who has children, who has economic dependency, or who simply isn't there yet.

X It refuses to be used against you.

Multiple features include explicit protections against the tool being weaponised by an abuser — warnings, disclaimers, and design choices that anticipate misuse and guard against it structurally.

X It refuses to require anything of you.

No account. No signup. No onboarding flow. No questions answered before access is granted. The tool opens. You are in. Whatever you need is there.

5 The Metacognitive Layer

NarcSafe was built by someone who has lived in proximity to what narcissistic abuse does to a person's relationship with reality. This proximity produces a particular kind of design intelligence — one that does not come from research papers alone, but from understanding the phenomenology of the experience.

The metacognitive insight that underlies the entire tool is this: narcissistic abuse is an attack on the self's capacity to know itself. Gaslighting is not merely lying — it is the systematic dismantling of the survivor's trust in her own perception. The recovery from narcissistic abuse is therefore not primarily emotional — it is epistemological. She must learn to trust her own mind again.

Everything in NarcSafe is in service of one thing: the slow restoration of the survivor's relationship with her own knowing.

The bilateral stimulation returns her to her body, which does not lie. The Patterns glossary gives her language for what she already sensed. The Safe Log externalises her experience so it can be seen. CRAFT and LiveMyDay rebuild her sense of self as an agent in her own life. Find Your Way does not tell her who she is — it asks her to recognise herself in a stage, and then points her toward what might help.

The design is in service of the epistemology. Every feature either restores perception, provides language, or rebuilds agency. Nothing is decorative.

6 What Comes Next

NarcSafe is complete as a first instrument. It works. It is in the world. What follows is deepening, not expansion for its own sake.

Areas worth exploring:

- Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Hindi language support — the tool is currently English-only. The survivor community spans all of India's languages.
- A trauma-informed therapist's companion view — a separate interface that allows a clinician to view (with explicit consent) what a client has logged, for use in session preparation.
- Legal template downloads — the Safe Log's pattern tags are already oriented toward potential legal use. Pre-formatted documentation templates, consistent with Indian domestic violence law, could make this pathway concrete.
- Offline-first PWA — for survivors in areas of low connectivity, a Progressive Web App with full offline capability would extend reach significantly.
- Evaluation partnership with a clinical institution — NIMHANS CAR submission is underway. A structured evaluation using the MARS framework would provide the evidence base for institutional recommendation.

What NarcSafe should not become: a platform, a community, a chat service, or a clinical tool. It is a private instrument. The moment it requires an account, connects users to each other, or stores data externally, it stops being what it is.

The tool does not ask her to name it first. It meets her where she is.

Dr. Sharada Rao · Founder, Svayam · narcsafe.netlify.app