

What Is Gaslighting? Signs of Gaslighting and What to Do

Gaslighting is a form of manipulation that often occurs in abusive relationships. It is a **covert type of emotional abuse** in which the **bully** or abuser misleads the target, creating a false narrative and making them question their judgments and reality. Ultimately, the victim of gaslighting starts to feel unsure about their perceptions of the world and even wonder if they are losing their sanity.

Gaslighting is "psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator."

Gaslighting primarily occurs in romantic relationships, but it's not uncommon in controlling friendships or among family members as well. People who gaslight others may have mental health disorders. They use this type of emotional abuse **to exert power over others** to manipulate friends, family members, or even co-workers.

How Gaslighting Works

Gaslighting is a technique that undermines a person's perception of reality. When someone is gaslighting you, you may **second-guess yourself**, your memories, recent events, and perceptions. After communicating with the person gaslighting you, you may be left feeling dazed and wondering if there is something wrong with you. You may be encouraged to think you are actually to blame for something or that you're just being too sensitive.

Gaslighting can confuse you and cause you **to question your judgment**, memory, self-worth, and overall mental health. It may help to know more about **the tactics** a person who is gaslighting you might use.

Lying to You

People who engage in gaslighting are often habitual and pathological liars and frequently **exhibit narcissistic tendencies**. It is typical for them to blatantly lie and never **back down** or change their stories, even when you call them out or provide proof of their deception. They may say something like: "You're making things up," "That never happened," or "You're crazy."

Discrediting You

People who gaslight spread rumors and gossip about you to others. They may pretend to be worried about you while subtly telling others that you seem emotionally unstable or "crazy." Unfortunately, this tactic can be extremely effective and many people **side with** the abuser or bully without knowing the full story.

Additionally, someone who engages in gaslighting may lie to you and tell you that other people also think this about you. These people may have never said a bad thing about you, but the person who is gaslighting you will make every attempt to get you to believe they do.

Distracting You

When you ask someone who gaslights a question or call them out for something they did or said, they may change the subject by asking a question instead of responding to the issue at hand. This not only **throws off your train of thought** but causes you to question the need to press a matter when they don't feel the need to respond.

Minimizing Your Thoughts and Feelings

Trivializing your emotions allows the person who is gaslighting you to gain power over you. They might make statements like: "Calm down," "You're overreacting," or "Why are you so sensitive?" All of these statements minimize how you're feeling or what you're thinking and communicate that you're wrong.

Shifting Blame

Blame-shifting is another common gaslighting tactic. Every discussion you have is somehow twisted to where you are to blame for something that occurred. Even when you try to discuss how the abuser's behavior makes you feel, they're able **to twist the conversation** so that you end up questioning if you are the cause of their bad behavior. For example, they may claim that if only you behaved differently, they would not treat you the way that they do.

Denying Wrongdoing

People who engage in bullying and emotional abuse are notorious for denying that they did anything wrong. They do this to avoid taking responsibility for their poor choices. This denial can leave the victim of gaslighting feeling unseen, unheard, and as though the impact on them is of no importance. This tactic also makes it very hard for the victim to move on or to heal from the bullying or abusiveness.

Using Compassionate Words as Weapons

Sometimes, when called out or questioned, a person who gaslights will use kind and loving words to try to smooth over the situation. They might say something like, "You know how much I love you. I would never hurt you on purpose."

These words may be what you want to hear, but they are inauthentic, especially if the same behavior is repeated. That said, they may be just enough to convince you **to let them off the hook**, which allows the person to escape responsibility or consequences for their hurtful behavior.

Rewriting History

A person who gaslights tends to retell stories in ways that are in their favor. For instance, if your partner shoved you against the wall and you are discussing it later, they may twist the story and say you stumbled and they tried to steady you, which is what caused you to fall into the wall.

You may begin to doubt your memory of what happened. Encouraging confusion or second-guessing on your part is exactly the intention.

Signs of Gaslighting

Being subjected to gaslighting can cause anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns including addiction and thoughts of suicide. For this reason, it's important to recognize when you're experiencing gaslighting. Ask yourself if any of the following statements ring true:

- **You doubt your feelings and reality:** You try to convince yourself that the treatment you receive is not that bad or that you are too sensitive.
- **You question your judgment and perceptions:** You are afraid of speaking up or expressing your emotions. You have learned that sharing your opinion usually makes you feel worse in the end, so you stay silent instead.
- **You feel vulnerable and insecure:** You often feel like you "walk on eggshells" around your partner, friend, or family member. You also **feel on edge** and lack self-esteem.

- **You feel alone and powerless:** You are convinced that everyone around you thinks you are "strange," "crazy," or "unstable," just like the person who is gaslighting you says you are. This makes you feel trapped and isolated.
- **You wonder if you are what they say you are:** The person who gaslights you says words make you feel like you are wrong, unintelligent, inadequate, or insane. Sometimes, you even find yourself repeating these statements to yourself.
- **You are disappointed in yourself and who you have become:** For instance, you feel like you are weak and passive, and that you used to be stronger and more assertive.
- **You feel confused:** The behavior of the person gaslighting you confuses you, almost as if they are Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.
- **You worry that you are too sensitive:** The person minimizes hurtful behaviors or words by saying "I was just joking" or "you need thicker skin."
- **You have a sense of impending doom:** You feel like something terrible is about to happen when you are around this person. This may include feeling threatened and on edge without knowing why.
- **You spend a lot of time apologizing:** You feel the need to apologize all the time for what you do or who you are.
- **You feel inadequate:** You feel like you are never "good enough." You try **to live up to the expectations** and demands of others, even if they are unreasonable.
- **You second-guess yourself:** You frequently wonder if you accurately remember the details of past events. You may have even stopped trying to share what you remember for fear that it is wrong.
- **You assume others are disappointed in you:** You apologize all the time for what you do or who you are, assuming people are **let down** by you or that you have somehow made a mistake.
- **You wonder what's wrong with you:** You wonder if there's something fundamentally wrong with you. In other words, you worry that you are not well mentally.
- **You struggle to make decisions because you distrust yourself:** You would rather allow your partner, friend, or family member to make decisions for you and avoid decision-making altogether.

Where Did Gaslighting Get Its Name?

The term gaslighting comes from a 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton, known in America as "Angel Street" and later developed into the film "Gas Light" directed by George Cukor.

In the suspense film, a manipulative husband tries to make his wife think she is losing her mind by making subtle changes in her environment, including slowly and steadily dimming the flame on a gas lamp. Not only does he **disrupt** her environment and make her believe she is insane, but he also abuses and controls her, cutting her off from family and friends.

Consequently, the wife begins second-guessing herself, her feelings, her perceptions, and her memories. Additionally, she feels neurotic, hypersensitive, and out-of-control, which is the goal of gaslighting—to leave the target **feeling off-kilter** and unsure of what is true and what isn't.

Because this film was an accurate portrayal of the controlling and toxic actions that manipulative people use, psychologists and counselors began **to label** this type of emotionally abusive behavior "gaslighting."