



# *What is Gaslighting?*

Gaslighting is a tactic employed by narcissists, Machiavellians, cult leaders, dictators, and control freaks. Sometimes, even “ordinary” people can resort to it in the hope of swaying another’s opinions toward their own.

The term is derived from the title of a 1938 British stage play, *Gas Light*, which was subsequently produced as a film, *Gaslight*, in the United Kingdom (1940) and the United States (1944). Those dramas vividly, if somewhat simplistically, depicted some of the basic elements of the technique. These may include: attempting to convince the victim of the truth of something intuitively bizarre or outrageous by forcefully insisting on it or by marshaling superficial evidence; flatly denying that one has said or done something that one has obviously said or done; dismissing the victim’s contrary perceptions or feelings as invalid or pathological; questioning the knowledge and impugning the motives of persons who contradict the viewpoint of the gaslighter; gradually isolating the victim from independent sources of information and validation, including other people; and manipulating the physical environment to encourage the victim to doubt the veracity of his memories or perception. In the play and films, for example, a deceitful husband drives his wife to near insanity by convincing her that she is a kleptomaniac and that she has only imagined the sounds in the attic and the dimming of the gaslights in their house, which were the result of his searching for her aunt’s missing jewels.



Gaslighting is an elaborate and insidious technique of deception and psychological manipulation, usually practiced by a single deceiver, or “gaslighter,” on a single victim over an extended period. Its effect is to gradually undermine the victim’s confidence in his own ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong, or reality from appearance, thereby rendering him pathologically dependent on the gaslighter in his thinking or feelings.

As part of the process, the victim's self-esteem is severely damaged, and he becomes additionally dependent on the gaslighter for emotional support and validation. In some cases, the intended (and achieved) result is to rob the victim of his sanity. The phenomenon is attested in the clinical literature as a form of narcissistic abuse whereby the extreme narcissist attempts to satisfy his pathological need for constant affirmation and esteem (for "narcissistic supply") by converting vulnerable people into intellectual and emotional slaves whom he paradoxically despises for their victimhood. Because the gaslighter is himself typically psychologically disordered, he is often not fully aware of what he is doing or why he is doing it.

Gaslighting tends to happen very gradually in a relationship; in fact, the abusive partner's actions may seem like just a harmless misunderstanding at first. Over time, however, these abusive behaviors continue, and a victim can become confused, anxious, isolated and depressed, while losing all sense of what is really happening. Then, the victim may start relying on the abusive partner more and more to define reality, which creates a very difficult situation to escape.

### **Relationship Gaslighting: Is It Happening to You?**

It's a sinisterly-sneaky form of mental abuse where information is spun to favor the abuser, or false information is presented with the full intention of making the victim doubt their own memory, perception or sanity. Unfortunately, gas lighting is a manipulative tactic we've all experienced on some level. Here are the telltale signs that you're being gaslighted in your relationship.

You're "diagnosed" with severe issues. Calling someone crazy is harmful. A manipulative partner who is gaslighting you is likely to diagnose you with some issue. "You're bi-polar. You're not thinking straight," etc. They may even suggest therapy. Always be suspicious of someone who seems keen to put a psychiatric label on you. If they're not your doctor, they've got an agenda. You're always being questioned. Whenever you talk about your feelings, you're met with "it's just in your head, relax." Your reactions are constantly belittled, your feelings treated as though they are not valid.

Your fear is being used against you. Manipulative people will listen to everything you say to find a flaw or semantic loophole, and then use them at their earliest convenience to make you feel awful. For example, if you're insecure about your weight, a gaslighting partner may make comments about people thinner than you and then deny doing such a thing if you bring it up to them, at a later date

You doubt your own perceptions. An example of this can be seen a lot of times with parents. Say you're dating a guy and your mother thinks he's a loser. After numerous instances of sabotage, you'll start to believe it yourself.

You don't know your own mind. A gaslighter thinks they know you, so if you deny their accusations, they'll make you feel like a liar. They may even accuse you of lying to yourself! This will disorient you and make you feel terrible.

What's normal? "Everyone does this!" "It's all the rage!" The gaslighter will try and make you see things their way. Don't lose touch with your instincts.

You can't remember anything anymore. When you confront the gaslighter about things that upset you, they will claim that you're remembering it incorrectly or deny it completely.

You stop trying to be heard. You just give up. When dealing with a gaslighter, you become upset, exhausted, and may just give up talking altogether. You may even stop telling others how you're doing. You lie to keep the peace. Extreme stress can cause people to do things that are out of character, like lie. To avoid any verbal or physical abuse, you'll find yourself bending the truth to keep your partner happy. You begin to wonder if you're too sensitive or emotional. A favorite tactic of a gaslighter is to make their partner feel like they're just too sensitive. They will accuse you of being overly emotional to downplay your valid points. You're always apologizing. You're walking on eggshells and always wind up apologizing to him — because he always makes you feel like you're in the wrong! Deep, deep down you know your truth and there's something wrong here. You make excuses for him.

You start thinking that maybe you're the crazy one. Intense manipulation can really get to a person. "He's right, I could be doing better," you may think. "His reaction was logical. I'm crazy." And when you apologize, he'll accept your apology only to throw your "poor behavior" back in your face when it serves him.

You are depressed. Depression and anxiety are bound to happen if you're a victim of gaslighting. You've been worn down by the constant criticism, you're exhausted and you probably feel overly sensitive (thanks to those manipulation tactics). You're unlikely to seek help with the real problem — your abuser — and instead, will try to cure those other "issues" like paranoia and your supposedly-faulty memory.

When we think of a typical bully, we think of someone who is outright harassing you and making life miserable in a very obvious and often public way. In short, we think of bullies as people who thrive on humiliating others. But, when it comes to gaslighting at work, it's often a projection from one person to another that stems from their feelings of insecurity. Often, the person doing the gaslighting is a very witty or charming person.

They use their great people skills and lots of humor that "sounds" innocent but has underhanded passive aggressive type comments, a gaslighter can:

Listen long enough to collect information from you, but are not fully engaged in the listening process to show signs that they authentically care about what you are saying

Lie and make you feel like it was your fault that they had to lie; There's low to zero accountability

Take information and twist it around to their advantage and use it against you or others

Gossip because it gives them more ammunition

Appear confident but if you observe them closely, these individuals are some of the most insecure people due to their inability to self-regulate their own emotions and thoughts.

One of the most insidious things about gaslighting is the denial of reality. Being denied what you have seen. Being denied what you have experienced and know to be true. It can make you feel like you are crazy. But you are not crazy.

Example-To illustrate this, a close friend was always running late. Initially, she pointed this out to him noting that it was not respectful. His response was to tell her she was "too sensitive". But over time, when this dynamic would continue to happen, it would lead to arguing and when she persisted, he would say, "You really have a problem with time, don't you?" and she in turn, ended up thinking he might be right. She began to doubt herself. "I began to think – what's the problem if someone is late, maybe I'm not being flexible enough."

Gaslighting over time leads to somebody experiencing the gaslight effect. Someone can try to gaslight you, but it can't happen unless you allow it.

### **Recognize there will never be accountability**

The person who is gaslighting you will never be able to see your point of view or take responsibility for their actions. They will never get it. They will never say, "Oh, you're right – you have a point."

Acknowledgement is not in the cards. And asserting yourself is not just useless but harmful. Because the person gaslighting will never be able to respond to logic and reason – so you have to be the one to recognize that logic and reason can't be applied.

### **Let go of the wish for things to be different**

The wish for things to be different is very powerful and inoculates you to the tumult. It allows you to continue to believe logic and reason will prevail. You want to believe the person will change. You want things to make sense. But they won't. You want to feel you are on safe ground. You have to let go of this wish. Because things will never make sense. You will never be heard. Why does this happen?

Sometimes, the person doing the gaslighting doesn't know they're doing it. Sometimes, it's as much to do with their own insecurities around being wrong or having less power in a relationship as it is out of an active desire to undermine their partner.

These insecurities might come out of experiences in childhood or in previous relationships. Or they might just be the kinds of insecurities that lots of us struggle to deal with – after all, it can be difficult to admit when you're wrong.

In other cases, this can be a deliberate tactic used to make their partner feel less confident and less likely to challenge them. Again, this is a totally unacceptable thing to do and a highly abusive pattern of behavior.

### **How do you begin to address it?**

If you feel like the way your partner engages with you is – intentionally or not – is a form of gaslighting, it's important to do something about it. It can be easy to slip this kind of interaction to becoming habit – with the consequence over time being significant damage to both your mental wellbeing and your relationship.

The first thing to do is to try to see the situation from the outside. This will have two effects: firstly, it will allow you to see more clearly whether what you are experiencing is a form of a gaslighting, and secondly, it will allow you to see your partner's behavior in a less emotional way.

Take a step back from the situation and assess it: do you think that this is what's happening? It might be useful to talk to family and friends – people who you trust who can give you an objective opinion on things. It can be a good idea to talk to more than one person: that way you can get a few different perspectives.

And then, try to understand: is what they're doing out of a desire to control you, or because they struggle with the idea of not being in control themselves. Taking a more analytical approach to our partner's behavior can help us to understand that it isn't always designed to hurt us, even if it does. If you do feel they're doing this intentionally, it's important to understand that this is not ok. Although it may sound dramatic, you may like to speak to The National Domestic Violence helpline. Their support workers can help you understand what you're going through and talk you through potential ways to address it.

### **Talking things over**

What's most important is that you and your partner find a new way of communicating. Although it can be difficult, it's important to address this issue directly. Your partner will need to know how their behavior is making you feel. Obviously, if you've got into a pattern of them dismissing your feelings, it isn't always easy to get through. But they will need to understand the effects of what they're doing before anything is going to change.



Don't try to bring things up in the middle of an argument, as anything you say then could be perceived as an attack. You might like to give a little forewarning of the conversation, letting your partner know that you'd like to talk about something that's been on your mind later.

### **Tips for Better Communication**

Open, honest communication should be part of every healthy relationship. Use the guidelines below to open the channels of communication between you and your partner. If you're in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, be careful using these tips. You know your relationship best. If any of these tips would put you in danger, don't try them.

**Find the Right Time.** If something is bothering you and you would like to have a conversation about it, it can be helpful to find the right time to talk. Try to find a time when both you and your partner are calm and not distracted, stressed or in a rush. You might even consider scheduling a time to talk if one or both of you is really busy!

**Talk Face to Face.** Avoid talking about serious matters or issues in writing. Text messages, letters and emails can be misinterpreted. Talk in person so there aren't any unnecessary miscommunications. If you're having trouble collecting your thoughts, consider writing them down ahead of time and reading them out loud to your partner.

**Do Not Attack.** Even when we mean well, we can sometimes come across as harsh because of our word choice. Using "you" can sound like you're attacking, which will make your partner defensive and less receptive to your message. Instead, try using "I" or "we." For example, say "I feel like we haven't been as close lately" instead of "You have been distant with me."

**Be Honest.** Agree to be honest. Sometimes the truth hurts, but it's the key to a healthy relationship. Admit that you aren't always perfect and apologize when you make a mistake instead of making excuses. You will feel better and it will help strengthen your relationship.

**Check Your Body Language.** Let your partner know you're really listening by giving them your full attention: sit up, face them and make eye contact when speaking. Don't take a phone call, text or play a video game when you're talking. Show your partner you respect them by listening and responding.

**Use the 48 Hour Rule.** If your partner does something that makes you angry, you need to tell them about it. But you don't have to do so right away. If you're still hurt 48 hours later, say something. If not, consider forgetting about it. But remember your partner can't read your mind. If you don't speak up when you're upset, there is no way for them to apologize or change. Once you do mention your hurt feelings and your partner sincerely apologizes, let it go. Don't bring up past issues if they're not relevant.

It's okay to get angry in a relationship – everyone does at some point! What's important is that you resolve conflicts in a healthy way. If you get angry with your partner, here are a few steps to take:

## How to Communicate if You Are Angry

**Stop.** If you get really angry about something, stop, take a step back and breathe. Tell your partner you'd like to take a short break before continuing the conversation. Give yourself time to calm down by watching TV, talking to a friend, playing a video game, taking a walk, listening to some music or whatever helps you relax. Taking a break can keep the situation from getting worse.

**Think.** After you're no longer upset, think about the situation and why you got so angry. Was it how your partner spoke or something they did? Figure out the real problem then think about how to explain your feelings.

**Talk.** Finally, talk to your partner and when you do, follow the tips above.

**Listen.** After you tell your partner how you feel, remember to stop talking and listen to what they have to say. You both deserve the opportunity to express how you feel in a safe and healthy environment.

Communicating isn't always easy. At first, some of these tips may feel unnatural or awkward, but they will help you communicate better and build a healthy relationship.

If you think your partner is gaslighting you and have already tried bringing up your concerns, seek professional help. Do not engage with your gaslighting partner when he or she starts harping and pointing fingers. Opt out of the power struggle and choose silence and distance.