

How to Confront and Stop Gaslighting

Gaslighting is an act of psychological manipulation that can degrade the victim's self-esteem and even lead to serious health issues, including depression — here's how to recognize and stop it.

You may have heard the term "gaslighting" in the news or on social media. But what exactly does it mean? Gaslighting is a term used to describe the act of using psychological manipulation to get another person to question their own feelings, perception, or sanity when in reality the "gaslighter" has caused some kind of pain or trauma to the victim. And in case you're wondering, yes — **gaslighting is a form of abuse**, says Viviana Coles, psychotherapist and doctor of marriage and family therapy at her practice Houston Relationship Therapy in Texas. *Usually, gaslighting is behavior used by a person trying to persuade someone to stay in an unhealthy romantic relationship, but it can occur in any relationship, such as parent to child, teacher to student, coach to player, employer to employee, etc.* Harassment related to gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, race, nationality, etc. are all forms of gaslighting.

Typical gaslighting involves one party being dependent on another, either professional or personal, and either online or in-person. Cyberbullying and in-person bullying are obvious forms of gaslighting. Too many people excuse themselves from gaslighting because they do not consider themselves bullies, when in reality, they are to some degree. According to scripture, gaslighting is observed when people "lord over" others (1 Peter 5:3; Mark 10:42; Matthew 20:25, Luke 22:25; 1 Corinthians 1:24; James 2:6; Ecclesiastes 8:9; Ezekiel 34:4; 1 Peter 3:7).

Symptoms of Gaslighting

- uses sarcasm, jokes, mocking, or levity to shift blame and not take responsibility for their thoughts and actions
- threatens, intimidates, instills fear when confronted
- derogatory remarks, passive aggressive or aggressive comments or actions
- justification of one's behavior or speech at the expense of another person
- refusal to take responsibility for one's actions by confession or making amends
- suppressing one's actions in religion or other activities
- judgmental attitudes towards most, if not all, people
- shutting people out of their lives (e.g. therefore, they do not truly know others, nor spend quality or intimate time with others unless it caters to their position or terms)
- uncomfortable when not in control or accomplishing their own agenda
- making others feel uncomfortable when they are uncomfortable
- not validating other's feelings or accepting other's ideas
- not able or desirous of listening to others (focusing, acknowledging, and gaining clarification related to other's perspectives)
- their truth is the only truth, which makes them feel that they are right and everyone is wrong (those who are wrong are considered lesser or bad in character)
- respect is defined by agreement to their principles and statements and all who disagree are considered disrespectful
- repeating the same idea, slogan, concept, and/or matter over and over to stress their point and convince others to join their perspective and position

- always pressing their own agenda and soliciting relationships based on their agenda ... otherwise, they have no interest in fostering a mutual relationship
- relationships are self-centered in order to promote themselves or to comfort themselves with little to no interest in others
- constantly blames everyone else but themselves
- corrects others frequently and has "the authoritative word" to lead discussion, expecting others to comply and align
- judges others for what they do themselves without any sensitivity related to their own behavior

People are not born gaslighters. *"It is a product of social learning — you witnessed another person doing it, you experienced it or you happened into it as a way of controlling a moment,"* says Robin Stern, Ph.D., a licensed psychoanalyst and co-founder and associate director for the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence in New Haven, Conn. *"Gaslighting is a way of 'righting' yourself when you feel off balance; of deflecting the conversation away from you and onto the character or skills or sanity or reality of your 'gaslightee'; of not having to take responsibility or answer direct questions that you don't want to answer,"* or projecting your pain onto someone else (intentional or inadvertently).

Initially, gaslighting in a relationship can cause the victims to have feelings of isolation, tattered self-esteem, insecure attachment and insecurity about their ability to think rationally; and also, to have a constant sense of guilt with difficulty in experiencing joy. However, the effects of gaslighting can become even more serious if it becomes a regular dynamic, says Stern. This can be observed commonly in cases of child abuse, spouse abuse, and other victimizations. Unfortunately, the gaslighter is most often unaware of their negative impact on others, and even worse, refuses to take any responsibility for it.

Examples of Gaslighting

Let's assume two people are in an argument. When one person puts themselves in a vulnerable position and openly shares that they feel hurt by the other's comments or actions, the gaslighter gets defensive, trying to explain what they actually meant, but at the expense of the one that feels hurt. In this gaslighting situation, the gaslighter often denies ever saying anything or doing anything that caused the pain, and then proceeds to direct the conversation in order to make the victim sense that their feelings were erroneous. Sometimes the gaslighter will admit their actions and resort to overt bullying, intimidation, and fear tactics. Some people who gaslight cannot remember what they actually said (especially in a derogatory manner) because their brain does not form such memories. This often occurs when the gaslighter continues to ignore social cues and justifies their actions and attitudes. Their conscience is desensitized and they do not realize the aggression and derogatory behavior towards others.

In a second situation, the gaslighter is seeking full control over the narrative and is unwilling to take any responsibility for an outcome that reflects negatively on them. They take the stand that they know best, that they are in the right and the other person is in the wrong. It is like they have tunnel-vision and cannot see any other perspective but their own. The gaslighter believes that

their perceived outcome is not only the best but also the only option for success, and they are only interested in their own definition of success. They do not care about the victim's feelings, perspective, or condition based on their bullying strategies.

Gaslighters use deceit, coercion, and manipulation to further their own goals and make the other person (or people) question their own perception of reality and the validity of their own feelings. Once the gaslighter removes the victim's autonomy and free will, that turns into emotional abuse — and can lead to neglect and even physical abuse as a means to control that person. A major obstacle to alleviating such behavior or stopping it altogether is the gaslighter's unwillingness to deal with said behavior. Often, after years of habit, it becomes part of their character, meaning that, to them, this is not only normal behavior, but is acceptable (in their own eyes).

The ultimate gaslighting action is to cut off communication with the victim before the victim can process the abuse and draw away from them. For example, an employer will fire the employee because they feel resistance that they are not comfortable with. A person will break off the relationship anticipating that the other person will break it off with them if they do not. Coaches will bench a player and threaten to limit playing time or even drop them from the team. Many times, the gaslighter will touch self-awareness and self-reflection yet refuse to accept the truth. For example, the gaslighter will think it strange that they are always getting into trouble with others and consider the possibility that they have some responsibility in the matter. However, they quickly reject that thinking and shift the blame to others instead.

How to Recognize Gaslighting

“One tell-tale sign that you are a victim of gaslighting is persistent, external blame placement that causes you to question what really happened,” says Coles. Victims carry a profound, nagging sense of guilt and fear of making mistakes ... as if someone is looking over their shoulder ready to pounce. *You may find yourself wishing you had recorded evidence of interactions because your memories of those interactions are so different from those of the person doing the gaslighting.*

Gaslighting can often lead to feelings of having done something wrong, or that you're being too sensitive. Victims of gaslighting are often overly apologetic, taking responsibility for things they did not even do or say just to attempt to make or keep the peace. Another trademark of being a victim is doubting oneself and doubting the facts of a situation or even doubting reality itself. *“There is a self-doubt that creeps into your mind because the abuser does not want you to assign the blame to them,”* Coles says. It can be difficult to recognize or address gaslighting because it is sometimes explained away as defensiveness or “having a different perspective” that needs to be tolerated. The gaslighter reacts to a comment or situation with various defensive reactions, such as “What kind of question is that?” They will hang up the phone during a conversation and not return the call for further discussion. They will avoid speaking about any past conversations or actions, yet constantly remind the victim of past events, actions, failures, in the victim's past (even if the gaslighter is incorrect in their statements or memory of the past). They denigrate the victim, yet demand respect or shut the victim out.

On the contrary, *when a relationship is based on love and respect, a gaslighter's action can be seen as an opportunity for self-reflection and change — but no one should have to be the only person in the relationship who's ever wrong or has to apologize*, says Coles. Gaslighters are people, too, and need love and respect. If they become self-aware, then they need help from others to identify and change the negative behavior. This process takes time. Keep in mind that gaslighters were either victims themselves at one time or observed other gaslighters and emulated them. There is hope of change.

Some people have a greater tendency towards introspection, low self-esteem and high levels of self-doubt. Being in a gaslighting situation is even more difficult for them. *Over time, their self-esteem and autonomy can erode to the point that manipulation can turn into physical neglect and harm*, Coles warns. Food disorders, asceticism, and other forms of personal abuse become the order of the day for victims. *"But even if the victims do not resort to physical abuse," Coles adds, "questioning one's self and ability to make good decisions can lead to depression and increased levels of anxiety, and both can lead to major health issues."*

Three Stages a Gaslighting Victim Experiences (Stern):

Disbelief. You can't believe the gaslighter would say such deceitful or silly things, and then try to tell you there's something wrong with you. Eventually, as the gaslighting continues and the perpetrator insists and asserts that they are right and certain about his or her reality and undermines yours, you begin to question if they could possibly be right.

Defense. You are constantly defending yourself, ruminating over and over about what the person said and what you said, and about who is right or wrong. You may write down your thoughts and their actions towards you to convince yourself you are sane and that their actions are wanting, yet there is a deep sense of guilt and lack of confidence, which expresses itself in outward (false) confidence.

Depression. When you've been gaslighted for a long period of time, you're not the same person you were when you entered into the relationship. You are more isolated and avoid conversations about your relationship and anything that might trigger the gaslighting. Often in this stage, you even take on the gaslighter's side of the argument.

Signs of possible gaslighting (victim's perspective):

- Constantly second-guessing yourself.
- Asking yourself, "Am I too sensitive?" multiple times a day.
- Feeling confused and even disillusioned at work.
- Always apologizing to others (mother/father/partner/boss).
- Trying unsuccessfully but repeatedly to correct or convince the gaslighter that their actions are hurting you or negatively affecting you.
- Unable to understand why, with so many apparently good things in your life, you aren't happier or content.

- Frequently making excuses to friends and family for the gaslighter's behavior or expressing hatred and a vengeful attitude towards the gaslighter.
- Finding yourself withholding information from friends and family so you don't have to explain or make excuses because you do not believe you will be supported.
- Knowing something is wrong, possibly even terribly wrong, but you can never quite express what it is, even to yourself.
- Lying or manipulating facts to avoid the put-downs and reality twists you are subjected to, fearing the consequences of telling the truth.
- Having trouble making simple decisions for fear of making a mistake.
- Sensing that you used to be a very different person — more confident, more fun-loving, more relaxed.
- Feeling hopeless and lacking sustaining joy.
- Possessing an underlying sense that you can't do anything right.
- Doubting whether you are a "good enough" girlfriend/boyfriend, wife/husband, employer/employee, friend/companion, daughter/son, etc..

How to Confront Gaslighting and Stop it

First, find a personal confidant whom you know will listen to your perspective and try sharing your interactions with them to solicit outside input. Listening does not mean agreement, but the willingness to actively focus on what you are saying, acknowledging what you are saying, and asking for clarification to be sure they understand your perspective. Spiritual counselors, pastors, or religious workers may not be the best option unless they are fully apprised of gaslighting and its effects on others. Too often, these leaders are gaslighters themselves and their counsel will be skewed at best. One recent study showed that 40 percent of pastors and Christian workers were narcissistic, meaning that their motive for ministry is based on self-motivation and self-gratification rather than service to Christ in dependence on Him. Be wise in your choices. *If the effects of gaslighting have become pervasive and debilitating, you should seek professional help to help you break the cycle of abuse*, says Coles.

Second, if you are growing in a healthy way humanly and feel confident within, and supported by at least one other, you can also address the gaslighter directly. However, for this to have impact and success, you must be willing and ready to (1) demand change in their behavior — and (2) to walk away from the relationship if those changes are not made, Coles adds. *It is important to minimize your own self-doubt to gain the confidence needed to take this action*. If you decide to try confronting the gaslighter, here are some factors to **consider telling the gaslighter**:

- “The mutual relationship I desire has not been attained because it is one-sided.”
- “Listening must be the foundation of our relationship and it has not been.”
- “I have noticed a destructive pattern in the relationship that I am no longer willing to be a part of.”

- “You consistently blame me for any wrongdoing in our relationship or you tell me that any concerns or complaints that I have of you and your actions are unfounded, making me feel totally responsible for negative actions or comments on your part.”
- “If you are unwilling to listen to me to some degree and understand my perspectives, I will no longer pursue this relationship until you agree and show signs of doing so.”
- “I want us to have a healthy, mutual relationship and that is why I have addressed my concerns.”

Two key issues when addressing someone who is gaslighting you is to remember to (1) identify and name the dynamic specifically and (2) determine if the gaslighter is behaving that way intentionally and consciously, or if they are just using a strategy that they have learned and incorporated into their character over time. Gaslighting is not vague or accidental, but an intentional manipulation. When the gaslighter’s actions are consistent and repeated (see previous list of symptoms of gaslighting), you have solid evidence to address the situation. *“If you care about the relationship,”* says Stern, *“I recommend*

- *stepping out of any power struggle because the gaslighter will not back down,*
- *setting limits or boundaries in that relationship that you enforce consistently,*
- *holding onto your own reality and pushing away the gaslighter’s opinions,*
- *avoid trying to convince your gaslighter that they are wrong and you are right,*
- *solicit social support from those who have the ability to listen and offer edifying support.”*

A true gaslighter will not back down and will continue to shift blame away from themselves regardless of any circumstance. However, people can change with God’s intervention. I was such a gaslighter. God intervened and I am growing towards becoming a loving person who can listen to others. It is important to note that former victims become key players in a gaslighter’s rehabilitation because they can gently and lovingly point out the areas of concern and help the gaslighter to realign their thinking based on actual experiences, not theory. A seeking person who desires to grow in a healthy way can undo the pattern of gaslighting others, but this requires much reflection and willingness to learn in areas that they were once unwilling. In time, even a former gaslighter can become self-aware, at least to some degree, and take steps to learn to listen to others and gain insight into other’s perspectives. It is a process, not a single event or action, to undo a lifetime of abuse.