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What Is Gaslighting? Meaning, Examples And Support

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If someone is intentionally distorting reality to make you feel like what you're seeing or feeling isn't real, you could be a victim of gaslighting. Gaslighting can come from a romantic partner, a boss, a family member, a doctor or anyone else in a position of power. If you're being gaslit, there are clear steps you can take to deal with your abuser and get help.

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What Is Gaslighting? Signs, Examples and How to Respond

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation that hinges on creating self-doubt. "I think of gaslighting as trying to associate someone with the label 'crazy,'" says Paige Sweet, Ph.D., an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan who studies gaslighting in relationships and in the workplace. "It's making someone seem or feel unstable, irrational and not credible, making them feel like what they're seeing or experiencing isn't real, that they're making it up, that no one else will believe them."

Gaslighting involves an imbalance of power between the abuser and the person they're gaslighting. Abusers often exploit stereotypes or vulnerabilities related to gender, sexuality, race, nationality and/or class.

"The most distinctive feature of gaslighting is that it's not enough for the gaslighter simply to control his victim or have things go his way: It's essential to him that the victim herself actually come to agree with him," writes Andrew D. Spear, an associate professor of philosophy at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan, in a 2019 paper on gaslighting in *Inquiry*.

Why Is It Called Gaslighting?

The term "gaslighting" comes from a 1938 play titled *Gas Light*, which was adapted into the 1940 film *Gas Light*, followed by the better-known 1944 film *Gaslight*, starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman. In each work, a male protagonist convinces his wife she's imagining things that are actually happening—including the dimming of the house's gas lights—with the result of making her believe she's gone insane.

Common Signs of Gaslighting

"One of the really difficult things about gaslighting is that it's confusing at its core," Sweet says. "It's meant to confuse you, and so it's really hard to identify it," she says, adding that it often comes from someone you care about and trust.

Signs to watch for include:

- **The "Twilight Zone" effect.** Victims of gaslighting often report feeling like a situation is surreal—like it's happening on a different plane from the rest of their life.
- **Language describing you or your behavior as crazy, irrational or overemotional.** "When I asked women about their partners' abusive tactics, they often described being called a 'crazy bitch,'" Sweet writes in "The Sociology of Gaslighting" in *American Sociological Review*. "This phrase came up so frequently, I began to think of it as the literal discourse of gaslighting."
- **Being told you're exaggerating.**
- **Feeling confused and powerless after leaving an interaction.**
- **Isolation.** Many gaslighters make efforts to isolate victims from friends, family and other support networks.
- **Tone policing.** A gaslighter may criticize your tone of voice if you challenge them on something. This is a tactic used to flip the script and make you feel that you're the one to blame, rather than your abuser.
- **A cycle of warm-cold behavior.** To throw a victim off balance, a gaslighter may alternate between verbal abuse and praise, often even in the same conversation.

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The National Domestic Violence Hotline lists five techniques a gaslighter may use against a victim:

- **Withholding.** The abusive partner pretends not to understand or refuses to listen.
- **Countering.** The abusive partner questions the victim's memory of events, even when the victim remembers them accurately.
- **Blocking/Diverting.** The abusive partner changes the subject and/or questions the victim's thoughts.
- **Trivializing.** The abusive partner makes the victim's needs or feelings seem unimportant.
- **Forgetting/Denial.** The abusive partner pretends to have forgotten what actually occurred or denies things like promises made to the victim.

How Gaslighting Can Affect Your Mental Health

Gaslighting is meant to provoke uncertainty and self-doubt, which is often harmful to a victim's mental health. If you're being gaslit, you may experience:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Disorientation
- Lowered self-esteem
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- A hyperbolized fear of danger, known as hypervigilance
- Suicidal thoughts

If you're a victim of gaslighting and struggling with any of the symptoms above, consider seeking support from a mental health counselor or other therapists. It can help you navigate the trauma both as it's occurring and after a particular event.

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How It Works: Gaslighting Examples

Below are examples of gaslighting researchers have documented through intense study of the phenomenon and extensive interviews with victims. Remember: Gaslighting is a pervasive problem, and these are just a few examples. If you identify with any of the signs in the section above, you may still be experiencing gaslighting even if none of the below scenarios describe your situation.

"A classic example is a philandering partner who tells their significant other that their perceptions of inappropriate or deceitful behavior are untrue," write Angeliqe M. Davis and Rose Ernst in an article on gaslighting in *Politics, Groups and Identities*.

Sweet's research, which focused on heterosexual relationships, cites many examples of everyday gaslighting:

"Ebony's partner would steal her money and then tell her she was 'careless' about finances and had lost it herself."

"Adriana's boyfriend hid her phone and then told her she had lost it, in a dual effort to confuse her and prevent her from communicating with others."

"Jenn described her ex-boyfriend as a 'chameleon' who made up small stories to confuse her, like lying about what color shirt he had worn the day before to make her feel disoriented."

"Emily described her ex-husband stealing her keys so she could not leave the house and then insisting she had lost them 'again.'"

Gaslighting in Romantic Relationships

Gaslighting can occur in any romantic relationship. The constant is the gaslighter is in a position of power. That said, research on gaslighting has found that it happens most frequently in heterosexual relationships, with a man gaslighting a woman.

Gaslighting often goes hand in hand with domestic violence. In a survey conducted by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 74% of adult female victims of domestic violence reported experiencing gaslighting from their partner or ex-partner.

Male abusers typically mobilize gendered stereotypes to gaslight their female partners. "The idea that women are inherently irrational, that masculinity equals reason and femininity equals overemotionality and unreason—I think that's really at the core of a lot of gaslighting in heterosexual intimate relationships," Sweet says. In her research, she addresses that while it may seem like we're moving past such stereotypes in the modern-day U.S., they persist, particularly in intimate relationships.

A woman's appearance and sexuality are often targets for gaslighting. When Sweet interviewed 43 women in Chicago who had experienced domestic violence and gaslighting, she heard stories like:

"Margaret's husband convinced her she was attracting too much attention by dressing up, doing her hair and wearing makeup. She began to believe his stories about men leering at her, so she started wearing sweatshirts and overeating—in her words, she stopped 'taking care' of herself to appease his suspicions."

"Carla's husband tried to convince her she was sleeping with men in the neighborhood, pointing to men on the street, asking her to identify which ones were waiting for her. He called her a 'prostitute' for having an IUD (intrauterine device, a form of birth control) and forced her to have it removed. His sexual gaslighting strategies inhibited Carla's mobility—she began to stay home all the time, refusing to go out because she feared the stories he might invent."

Gaslighting and Gender

Intimate relationships are not the only space in which gender plays into gaslighting. Other examples of gender-based gaslighting include:

Gaslighting in medicine. Some women are gaslit by their doctors, who may use the stereotype that women are irrational or hysterical to dismiss legitimate symptoms and health concerns and convince a female patient that nothing is actually wrong with her.

Public or collective gaslighting. Many women experience the effects of public gaslighting, also called collective

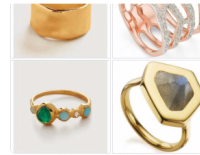


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gaslighting, when statements by a public figure or an ordinary person that are widely shared on social media can lead women as a collective to second-guess themselves.

In her paper "Gaslighting, Misogyny and Psychological Oppression," Cynthia A. Stark, Ph.D., shares the example of two high school football players who raped an unconscious 16-year-old at a party and then received sympathy from a CNN reporter who described them as "two young men that had such promising futures, star football players, very good students, literally watched as they believed their lives fell apart."

"This type of public gaslighting... is capable of inducing in women a particular state of mind where they cannot quite fully embrace their own perception that the man's action was wrong or harmful," Stark writes. "They struggle with the disquiet of believing 'deep down' that the woman in question was unjustly treated but also believing that she is perhaps making a big deal out of nothing or that the boys should be allowed to make one mistake."

Gaslighting of transgender people. A gaslighter may try to convince a transgender person that they have a mental health disorder. In a more subtle show of gaslighting, a parent may tell their transgender daughter that she should wear pants because they are more comfortable for playtime, causing the child to doubt her desire to wear skirts or dresses.

Often, gaslighting behavior comes from parents of transgender children who state they are supportive of their child, which makes the gaslighting more difficult to identify.

Gaslighting in the legal system. Police officers, judges or juries may become unknowing participants in gender-based gaslighting. "The legal system becomes a critical site of gaslighting when abusers gain control of the narrative and 'flip' stories and events, drawing on stereotypes about women as irrational, and especially about black women as aggressive," Sweet writes. "In this way, institutional authorities sometimes become unknowing colluders in gaslighting tactics, setting women up for further violence and loss of credibility." This is often illustrated in child custody cases and sexual assault cases.

Gaslighting and Race

In their paper, "Racial Gaslighting," Davis and Ernst define racial gaslighting as "the political, social, economic and cultural process that perpetuates and normalizes a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist." Racial gaslighting has a long history in the U.S. and persists today.

The euphemistic language used by the U.S. government during the forced removal of Japanese-American citizens from their homes during WWII is an example of racial gaslighting. A 1944 Supreme Court decision about the constitutionality of forcing citizens into concentration camps refused to use the term "concentration camps" and instead called the camps "assembly and relocation centers." This language served to sow doubt on the atrocities of the situation.

More recently, the All Lives Matter movement is an example of racial gaslighting. The movement "disguises the prioritizing of white lives" and "erases the centuries of brutalization and dehumanization of Black bodies," Davis and Ernst write.

Racial gaslighting also frequently happens in the workplace, particularly in a workplace that is predominantly white. "For women of color, [gaslighting] takes the form of colleagues doubting or outright denying their negative experiences," write researchers Michelle A. Rodrigues, Ruby Mendenhall and Kathryn B. H. Clancy in a research paper on gaslighting of women of color who work as scientists.

This type of gaslighting is also present in diversity initiatives that come off as hollow and not addressing real issues. Initiatives that "center white colleagues' desire to present a rosy picture of inclusion... serve to gaslight marginalized students and faculty, as they are perpetually told the environment is welcoming and inclusive while their own lived experiences are ignored and denied," the researchers find.

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Gaslighting in the Workplace

Gaslighting in the workplace can also occur outside of a racial dynamic. If a person in a position of power causes you to question yourself in a way that is negatively affecting your career or confidence in your abilities, you may be experiencing gaslighting.

If you report workplace misconduct of any kind, you may experience what's called whistle-blower gaslighting, which "creates a situation where the whistle-blower doubts her perceptions, competence and mental state," writes registered nurse Kathy Ahern, Ph.D., in a paper in *The Journal of Perinatal & Neonatal Nursing*. This happens when a superior—someone you trusted to handle the problem—instead tries to explain it away "and then pronounces that the whistle-blower is irrationally overreacting to normal everyday interactions," Ahern writes.

Specifically, employees who file sexual harassment claims are often gaslit, Sweet says, with both perpetrators and management often denying anything happened, causing the victim to question their own memory and narrative of the events.

Gaslighting in Politics

Gaslighting can even impact political polls. It's not uncommon for a politician or political entity to use gaslighting as a tactic to divert public discourse and use manipulation to garner support for or against a certain viewpoint.

The strategy "utilizes deceptive and manipulative use of information with the motivation to destabilize and disorient public opinion on political issues," writes Farah Latif, a communications expert from George Washington University, in the book series *President Trump's First Term: The Year in C-SPAN Archives Research, Volume 5*.

When gaslighting gets partisan, politicians may use the power of messaging to create false narratives, explains Latif. They may even try to undermine constituents' sense of reality for supporting an opposing idea or questioning the perpetrator's narrative in the first place.

How to Respond to Gaslighting

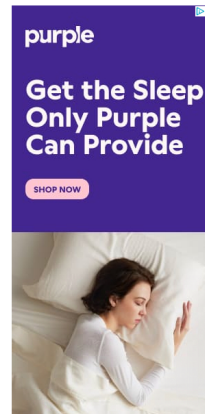
1. Tell as many people as possible what's happening.

"Don't just tell one person, 'I think I'm experiencing this,'" Sweet says. "Tell multiple people in your social network so they can back you up and verify your experience of reality."

"When friends and colleagues affirm your experiences of mistreatment are real, you're better able to recognize that the abuse is not due to personal faults," Rodrigues, Mendenhall and Clancy write in their study.

2. Stay in touch with friends and family.

Even if you're not directly discussing the gaslighting, it's important to keep in contact with friends and family members. When you're isolated, you're more susceptible to self-doubt. Gaslighters know this and often try to convince you only they have your best interest at heart. "He said, 'You are crazy. No one loves you. You are here with me. You don't have anyone else here,'" one victim of gaslighting told Sweet. If you're watching for that behavior, you may be more aware that



it's happening and more likely to shut it down.

3. Keep a journal.

"If gaslighting has eaten away at your self-esteem and made you feel confused and disoriented, keeping a journal can help you take back some control," advises My CWA, a nonprofit that supports families affected by domestic abuse. "You can keep checking your version of events and confirm that things actually happened the way you remember, even if your abuser is telling you something different."

4. Contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline or National Sexual Assault Hotline.

"Sexual assault advocates are very experienced in dealing with psychological manipulation of all kinds," Sweet says. You can reach the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-SAFE and the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-4673. Both are available 24 hours a day and offer online chat functions as well.

Your Safety Is Important

If you are a survivor of sexual assault and need support, call 800.656.HOPE (4673) to be connected with a trained staff member from a sexual assault service provider in your area.

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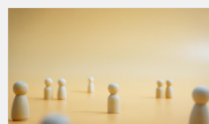
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- + How do you know if someone is gaslighting you?

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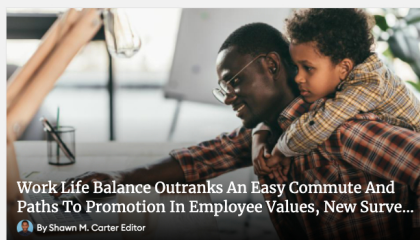
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