

# Gaslighting!

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*Gaslighting, an insidious form of manipulation and control, is a term increasingly popping up in articles, television news, and social media. What exactly is gaslighting, and who is at risk of falling prey to it? Let's take a look at exactly what gaslighting is, how it works and plays out, and how to deal with manipulative and controlling people in our own lives.*

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The term gaslighting refers to a specific, highly calculating form of manipulation of one individual by another. Most commonly, gaslighting is carried out by someone in close contact and in a position of trust, like an intimate partner, a close friend or family member, or someone with a close working relationship with the target of the manipulation. It is a deliberate and complex means of intentionally controlling an individual, which is carried out over an extended period of time.

The term itself originates from a 1930's film adapted from a stage play. Over the course of the story, a husband successfully undermines, destabilizes, confuses, and controls his wife. Over time, he causes her to question and doubt her thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and even what she sees with her own eyes — his continuing and deliberate dimming of the gaslight which he repeatedly denies.

It is important for us to understand what gaslighting is because we are all potentially vulnerable to this powerful and dangerous form of manipulation.

## **Dangerous manipulation**

The film grippingly and with accuracy and precision depicts both subtle and overt ways in which a perpetrator carries out the prolonged and intentional destabilization of his target, his wife.

Just as in the film, in real life, this form of control can creep in virtually undetected. Emotionally abusive people — often people with low self-esteem — who wish to control

others rather than engage in mutually respectful relationships that require consideration, empathy, compassion, and kindness, seek ways to undermine and overpower someone they fear losing, regardless of the damage to the target of their manipulation.

## **Real-life examples**

A close work colleague, for example, may seek to control and exploit a talented person under their supervision. Over time, they might take ownership and credit for their target's ideas or work, and undermine their judgment, sense of their own abilities, talents, and potential while presenting an entirely different and highly supportive front to the rest of the organization. Should the target express a desire to move on, they could be showered with praise and false promises and persuaded to stay put. The behaviors of the manipulative work colleague might range from quite subtle to bold, disingenuous, and outrageous, and yet remain undetected due to the derailing effect on the target. What happens to the target of this type of manipulation and control is highly destabilizing: they are left feeling confused, lacking in confidence in their abilities and prospects, and doubting their own thoughts and perceptions of what is really going on. Eventually, even with evidence to the contrary, the target of gaslighting becomes trapped and will have to mount a tremendous and often challenging effort to regain their freedom and autonomy.

Manipulative intimate partner, friend, or family member relationships can have the same destabilizing effect. For example, an individual shows up for a dinner date with

someone they have only briefly been dating, at a predetermined time and location. Their date is a no-show and later swears up and down that they did not make this arrangement. Despite the written proof in the form of a reminder in their electronic day timer, and a clear memory of having made this plan, the target of the manipulative partner decides not to make a big deal out of it, and continues seeing this person. Over time, repeated no-shows, unfulfilled promises, denials, minimized hurt feelings interspersed with praise and declarations of love and devotion, leave the target of these abusive manipulations confused, riddled with doubt, and questioning their own sense of reality.

In numerous, and perhaps more easily identifiable manipulative situations, public figures are sometimes called out for saying one thing and doing another. Some public figures, for example, question the efficacy and safety of COVID vaccines, while privately ensuring that they themselves and their family members are vaccinated. Celebrity champions of environmental causes caution the public to reduce their carbon footprint while traveling the world on private jets and yachts. The cognitive dissonance of these mixed messages mirrors the same destabilizing and disingenuous behaviors of manipulation and control.

### **Identifying behaviors and patterns**

In the throes of a relationship where gaslighting is taking place, a pattern emerges. This pattern consists of a series of situations that do not align with the target's sense of what is real or true. The target of manipulation, despite physical evidence to the contrary, is left in a state of self-doubt.

Further, abusers also engage in a series of behaviors designed to instill self-doubt in their target. They deflect, change subjects, manipulate or divert conversations to avoid detection. Targets of manipulation are often forced to defend themselves. Once the target begins to doubt themselves, the abuser has found their way in. Eventually, over an

extended period of time, the abuser lowers self-esteem and weakens the sense of reality and autonomy of the target. Targets of gaslighting exhibit high levels of self-doubt and low self-esteem. They also make excuses for the behavior of their abuser, often going to great lengths to defend and protect them.

### **If you or someone you know is in a gaslighting relationship**

As with all forms of abuse, understanding how gaslighting works and feels, and acknowledging what is happening are the first steps to breaking free. Escaping from a gaslighting relationship is not easy, but it is possible. The first step is deciding to leave. From there, leaving often involves ending all communication and cutting the abuser out of your life entirely, and bringing in supports to assist you when your abuser attempts to re-establish control.

We are meant to live our own lives, and surround ourselves with people who align with our goals and values. Understanding and identifying how abuse and manipulation can creep in and play out in our relationships is key to protecting ourselves and those we love from this dangerous form of emotional abuse.

### **Five strategies of the Gaslighter**

*Being aware of the strategies and behaviors of gaslighting is the best form of prevention and self-protection*


- **Destabilization:** gaslighters deliberately challenge the perceptions and realities of their target
- **Deception:** gaslighters intentionally lie and deceive to confuse their target
- **Denial:** gaslighters deny their target's truth and their lies, even in the face of evidence to the contrary
- **Deflection:** gaslighters change subjects, shift focus, and change lanes when confronted with their behaviors
- **Manipulation:** gaslighters, when threatened with abandonment, will shower their target with praise and affection in an effort to maintain control

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**About the author**

*Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker, columnist and advocate in the field of mental health and wellness.*

*Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, will be available for pre-sales in February 2022, and her in-depth online self-help program, **A Deeper Wellness**, offers powerful mental health guidance, life skills, knowledge and healing, anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/> <https://www.drmonicavermani.com/>*

