

GASLIGHTERS - WHO ARE THEY?

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Abstract. Gaslighting is a manipulative technique used to make someone question their perception of reality. The name of “gaslighting” comes from the title of British playwright Patrick Hamilton's play „Gas Light” and people who use this technique are called “gaslighters”. There are several ways to spot a gaslighter like the fact that they never take responsibility for their actions and do everything to isolate you from everyone else. Nobody is born a gaslighter but becomes them due to social circumstances. However, it is important to understand how to deal with one if you had the misfortune to meet them in your life.

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Introduction

According to Oxford English Dictionary, “to gaslight” means “to manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity” [1]. This psychological manipulation is designed to expose the individual as “defective”, “weird” or “abnormal”. The name of “gaslighting” comes from the title of British playwright Patrick Hamilton's play "Gas Light". Later on, a homonymous movie starring Ingrid Bergman was shown on the screen, in which the paradigm of gaslighting was clearly displayed.

Gregory (played by Charles Boyer) consciously tries to drive his wife Paula (played by Ingrid Bergman) crazy by manipulating her. Gregory's goal is to hospitalize Paula for her mental instability and give himself access to her very expensive jewels. Over the course of months, we see him engage in one manipulative tactic after another. He steals a brooch from Paula's purse to make her doubt her memory of putting it there. He accuses her of stealing his watch, and then "discovers" the watch in her purse, after secretly putting it there on his own while she is in the presence of friends who had been warned about Paula's instability. The title of the movie is inspired by the following manipulative move: Gregory looks for Paula's jewels in the attic on a regular basis, and when he does, the lights in the attic diminish the gaslights throughout the home. Paula always questions him about the gaslights dimming when this happens. And each time, Gregory claims Paula is hallucinating, implying that this, too, is a symptom of her mental illness. All the while, Gregory is full of phrases of claimed concern like “why don't you rest a while”, “do you really want to go out? You know you haven't been well”, etc.

In our lives and therapy, this term applies to behavior that typically differs from Gregory's in two important ways. First, those who participate in this sort of emotional manipulation are generally not consciously trying to drive their targets crazy. Second, they frequently appear to lack a clear goal in mind: they are not attempting to drive their audience 'mad' for the sake of something as simple as precious diamonds [2].

The Portrait of a Gaslighter

Well, how do we identify a gaslighter? In her book “Gaslighting: Recognize Manipulative and Emotionally Abusive People -- and Break Free”, Dr. Stephanie Sarkis list all the qualities present in these kinds of people [3]. It is important to mention that you may think “My friend did that to me once” or “Am I a gaslighter?” while reading some of the points provided below. Everyone can gaslight someone without knowing it. What is important is that you should be conscious of these behaviors and try to get rid of them or people who are gaslighting you. Also, just one matching point

isn't enough to call someone a gaslighter. When a person shows more of these characteristics over time, you're probably dealing with one. Here are some of them:

Their Apologies Are Always Conditional

Gaslighters are masters of the "conditional apology". They will apologize only if they're trying to obtain something from you or if you or someone else confronted them publicly and asked for an apology. In any other cases, they will not truly apologize but rather say something like "I'm sorry you're feeling that way", "Sorry, it was just a joke.", "I'm sorry I screamed, but you provoked me" etc. which can be translated as "I'm sorry but we both know it's your fault" or "You're overreacting". It is always someone else's fault. Remember: Just because a sentence has "sorry" in it, doesn't make it a true apology. Pay attention if they're willing to take personal responsibility.

They Isolate You from Others Using Lies

Gaslighters often turn people against one another. It offers them a feeling of control and power. As an example, let's say Anne is a gaslighter. She will go to Laura and lie that Jessica has said something unpleasant behind Laura's back. Now Laura has a conflict with Jessica. People are enraged and fight with one another and the gaslighter receives a power boost as a result of their victory. This move will make you closer to the gaslighter and will make you want to isolate from others. They're trying to separate you from the person they're setting you against. Remember: If someone doesn't say anything to you explicitly, presume that what they're saying isn't true and avoid third parties in your communication with others.

They Tell Others Something Is Wrong with You

That is another way to isolate you but, in this case, it's not your choice but others'. Gaslighters will use a variety of tactics to put a wall between you and everyone else. Probably you don't know if someone's talking behind your back and what they're saying but if you noticed a person telling you someone is "weird" or "crazy", chances are they might be doing that to you too. For example, if your significant other is telling you all of their exes were crazy and manipulative, there is a high probability you're going to be the next "toxic" ex. Telling people that you are insane is the most efficient approach to discredit you. That's when the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon starts to work. This is a cognitive bias where something you recently learned suddenly appears "everywhere". People learned that you're "crazy" and now everything you do will seem bizarre so they will be more tempted to stop communicating with you or doubt you.

They Use Your Weaknesses and Mistakes Against You

In a good relationship, it's absolutely normal to share private thoughts and feelings with your significant other. Unfortunately, while you're trying to establish a strong bond, the gaslighter would rarely divulge as many personal details. In the meantime, if you're dealing with a gaslighter, the knowledge you offer will soon be used against you in fighting as "evidence". For example, if you shared something about a past conflict you had with your colleague, they may use it in your next fight as "See, no wonder why your colleagues at work hate you.". All your actions will be meticulously scanned in order to find as many weaknesses as possible. They also tend to hyperbole your past mistakes so it seems like you're so stupid or that something is fundamentally wrong with you: "How could you possibly do it?", "Isn't it obvious?" etc.

Their Don't Really Compliment People

Gaslighters are extraordinary when it comes to backhanded compliments – compliments that either intentionally or unintentionally also may be taken as an insult, like "That dress is great! It makes you seem less fat." or "I didn't expect you to get the job — Congratulations!". They don't truly compliment you because everything is a way to remind you that you're not perfect.

They often tease you

Gaslighters are the worst kind of teasers. It starts with some minor things like your accent in a foreign language or the way you presented your homework during the class. Then it escalates to them teasing you in front of your peers. When you express your dissatisfaction with their statements or impersonation, they accuse you of being overly sensitive. This isn't your typical sibling teasing or joking with your friends because it can get cruel. Also, gaslighters will never tolerate any kind of

teasing from you, Of course, some people can tease you just for fun, not meaning to hurt you in any way. Remember that if something is insulting you should immediately ask them to cease this sort of statement and explain why it was damaging for you. “It was just a joke” and the fact that “others don’t react like that” it’s not a valid reason. Most people will (truly) apologize and do their best to not harm you in the future. Regretfully, gaslighters won’t do that but you still have to set your own boundaries and not just accept it as it is.

They always brag about their accomplishments

Gaslighters frequently brag about their accomplishments, such as receiving a scholarship, good grades or a raise at work. They often exaggerate or may even tell you multiple times about an accomplishment that was like five years ago. They will get angry with you if you don't respond with enthusiasm and admiration and will try to minimize your success. Gaslighters place a high value on their own accomplishments and traits, no matter how irrational these accomplishments and attributes may be. It’s important for them not only to feel superior but to make everyone think that way so they can get some authority or attention. They also can get into “mansplaining” (or the female version – “femsplaining”) – explaining to you something you already know but as if they have more knowledge than you in a particular field. For example, if you’re a professional graphic designer and they just made a good poster in high school and received a good grade for it but they will try to tell you how to better do your job, even though you didn’t ask for their advice,

They Invalidate Your Feelings

“You’re overreacting”, “You’re too sensitive”, “Don’t be so dramatic” etc. These are just the most frequently used phrases to invalidate your feelings. In this way, they are telling you indirectly something is wrong with you and that your perception of reality is wrong. The illusory truth effect tells us if we hear the same information repeated over and over again, we typically believe it to be true. Thus, if they tell you you’re “too emotional” not just once or twice, you’re going to fall into the trap. Especially if the gaslighter has some “allies” that may appear due to the previous point. You’ll start questioning yourself, your feelings, and your actions so you become easily manipulated. If you already think that way, it’s better to ask a psychotherapist for help cause they’re more qualified. Also, the very definition of “overreacting” implies there is a “correct” way to react which is not true. Everyone is coping differently.

Why Gaslighters Gaslight?

In her book, “The Gaslight Effect” [4], dr. Robin Stern stipulates that people use this tactic as a way to regain control of the relationship, relieve some anxiety, and feel "in charge" once more. It helps to shift the blame and tear down someone else while keeping them hooked, especially if what they're hooked on is the overwhelming need to please someone else — or prove that person wrong. Nobody is born a gaslighter. People become them because of social circumstances. They see it, experience its effects, or come upon it and realize it is a powerful instrument that works wonderfully. Some mimic their parents’ behavior and end up using the same manipulations because that’s just their normal way of interaction with others within their family. The gaslighter may be completely unaware that he is engaging in any kind of strategic or manipulative act. He may lack self-awareness and believe he is just expressing himself directly. Some started developing that behavior for self-preservation and “escape” from abusive parents and just carried it on in their adult life without changing or questioning that way of “survival”.

What Should I Do?

In the article “If Your Partner Keeps Gaslighting You, Here's What You Can Do” by Madeleine Burry [5], the author gives great advice for those who are gaslighted by their romantic partners but it can also be applied in all sorts of relationships.

React calmly

It’s hard sometimes to keep calm when you know you’re being manipulated but it’s important to understand gaslighters use your anger against you. The moment you look frustrated and not

confident enough – you seem to be the problem and the guilty one, especially if you're in public. "I think we didn't understand each other correctly, may we talk things through?" could be a great conversation starter where you can expose your point of view and listen to theirs.

Trust Your Guts

Gaslighters may be really persuasive and great at pressuring people. You should always ask yourself "What I actually believe is going on?". Keeping a diary or notes where you constantly analyze your days and emotions, not feeling judged, may help you find the answer to that question.

Go To a Specialist If the Gaslighting Doesn't Stop

You tried to talk to the gaslighter and they didn't change their behavior? Therapy might help you overcome gaslighting and define the next steps that should be taken. Furthermore, it's an excellent way to rebuild your ruined confidence. If it's possible, it would be beneficial to bring the gaslighter to therapy (e.g., couple therapy) so you could sort things out and work on building a healthy relationship.

Leave

If they're not willing to put the effort to change – you're powerless. The best thing you can do for your mental health is to leave or at least to minimize the communication. It's not an easy or pleasant process but it's totally worth it.

Conclusions

Gaslighting is a widely used technique. In fact, it's so common that it was shortlisted as Word of The Year 2018 from Oxford Dictionary. (Spoiler: the word "toxic" won the competition.) However, a lot of people don't know what it is or can't recognize gaslighting as well as not being gaslighters themselves. Sadly, most of us don't understand that some of our actions may be toxic even if we didn't mean them to be. If any of you identified themselves as a gaslighter after reading this article and are willing to change – congratulations! You're one step closer to a better life. If you identified a gaslighter in your life – I hope they're willing to put in some effort and change their behavioral patterns. In any case, gaslighting became rooted in our life but this fact doesn't make it any less harmful. Therefore, it's extremely important to know what is it and educate ourselves as well as our environment about it.

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