



GASLIGHTING – Leader’s Guide

Written By Cindy Kiser, 2022 KAFCE Education Program Committee.

Additional Leader’s Guide: NAFCE Hearth Fire Series # 29: “Woman to Woman: ‘Why Should Love Hurt?’” and # 30: “Woman to Woman: Resisting the Deadly Triangle of Violence”.

Lesson Goals: Participants will become familiar with signs of being gaslighted. Participants will become aware of steps to recover from being gaslighted.

Community Activities: Publish news articles. Make a display. Hold informative meetings in the community. Volunteer to talk with young people such as classrooms, 4H groups, church youth groups, etc. Develop radio or TV spots to inform the public. Reach out through social media, such as Facebook, TikTok (why not have a dance to combat gaslighting) or Tweet your message. Post a YouTube piece on steps to avoid being gaslighted. Utilize blogs. Make a brochure. Network the message. October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Purple Ribbons.

Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse where a person or group makes someone question their sanity, perception of reality, or memories. People experiencing gaslighting often feel confused, anxious, and unable to trust themselves.

The phrase originated from a 1938 mystery thriller written by British playwright Patrick Hamilton called *Gas Light*, made into a popular movie in 1944 starring Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer. In the film, husband Gregory manipulates his adoring, trusting wife Paula into believing she can no longer trust her own perceptions of reality.

In one pivotal scene, Gregory causes the gaslights in the house to flicker by turning them on in the attic of the house. Yet when Paula asks why the gaslights are flickering, he insists that it’s not really happening and that it’s all in her mind, causing her to doubt her self-perception. Hence the term “gaslighting” was born.

Why Does Gaslighting Happen:

People seek power and control in relationships for a wide variety of reasons, so the rationalizations for gaslighting vary from case to case. However, there are a few patterns.

They believe this is the only way to sustain the relationship.

In some cases, gaslighting is a way to try to keep somebody who you want to be in a relationship with around in a very abusive way-there is this notion that this is the only way to sustain the relationship.

They feel better about themselves by having control over someone else.

Sometimes, there is a genuine sense of, “If I’m controlling other people, then I feel better about where I’m at,” and that search for power is something that expresses itself in the relationship.

They just enjoy the power and control.

There is a decent amount of research that shows there are people who genuinely find pleasure having control over others.

Gaslighter’s Strategies:

Stephanie Sarkis, Ph.D., wrote a book called *Gaslighting: Recognize Manipulative and Emotionally Abusive People—And Break Free* which made the term even more common. In her book, she says her research found that these are the common strategies gaslighters use to convince victims that they are losing touch with reality:

- **They tell blatant lies.** They want you to question everything. So they lie about all things, big and small.
- **They deny saying things they said.** Despite that you may have proof that they said something, they will insist they never did just so you’ll question your reality.
- **They wear you down.** They persist at gradually wearing their victims down over time. They work so slowly that most victims do not even realize it is happening.
- **They use what’s important to you as ammunition.** Whether they know you value your kids above all else, or they know your career is very important to you, they attack the foundation of your being.
- **Their behavior doesn’t match their words.** What they say is meaningless. They act completely contrary to their words by their behavior.
- **They use positive reinforcement to confuse you.** They cut you down to cause you to lose confidence. But then they offer praise as a way to convince you that they aren’t so bad.
- **They confuse you.** Gaslighters want to confuse you about everything. But at the same time, they want you to look toward them as a sense of stability.
- **They project onto others.** They might constantly accuse you of doing the things that they’re doing, like using drugs or cheating.
- **They try to align people against you.** They may try to convince you that your loved ones “know you are worthless” or “think you are bad.” This makes it difficult for you to know who to trust.
- **They call you “crazy.”** They question your sanity and tell other people that you are “crazy.” If you eventually reach out for help, other people might question whether to believe you if the perpetrator has already tried to convince them that you have lost touch with reality.
- **They tell you everyone else is lying.** They may say that everyone in your group of family and friends is lying. They may also say the media lies as a way to manipulate you. They want you to have to rely on them for the “correct” information.
- **The Silent Treatment.** Getting the silent treatment can be unbearable, however a very effective tool for the Gaslighter. You’d think you would enjoy not having to listen to your abuser but the truth is, receiving the silent treatment can lead to severe emotional problems and extreme anger.

What to Do If They're Gaslighting You

The first step in recovering from gaslighting is to commit to breaking the cycle of abuse. Don't allow your plans to be derailed by your abuser, who will likely ramp up his or her manipulations upon recognizing your intent to escape the relationship. Prepare yourself for this, and likewise aim to stay one step ahead in the pattern so that you're able to remain as disassociated as possible. Here are some additional tips that may help:

- **Seek help from someone outside the relationship.**

First and foremost, it is not advised to talk to your partner about feeling like you're being gaslit, because they're going to tell you that what you're seeing isn't what you're actually seeing. They want to maintain control in the power dynamic.

Instead, turn to a friend, family members, or trusted coworkers to validate your feelings. This won't be easy, as a byproduct of gaslighting is the feeling of isolation; the victim has been manipulated to believe that their abuser is the only one who truly understands them. Realize that this isn't the case and seek out a confidant who can help you assess the situation, corroborate your memories, and/or confirm that something's not right.

- **Approach your recovery like a marathon, not a sprint.**

While speaking with a loved one is therapeutic, you might need the counsel of an impartial third party (think psychologist or therapist) to not only guide you out of the smoke and mirrors, but to help ensure you don't slip back into the cycle of abuse, no matter the nature of the relationship in question—romantic, familial, platonic, professional, or otherwise.

Considering couples' therapy with your partner? Go for it, but be sure to book your own, private sessions, too. And remember: Long-term, regular therapy with a qualified professional might be necessary to equip you with the tools needed to break free from (or at least distance yourself from) a toxic relationship. After all, building a sturdy bridge between your past missteps and your future successes is unlikely to happen in a single session.

- **Focus on you.**

Do not lose your sense of self. This, coupled with the aftershocks of a breakup (even if the split is from a family member or a friend), can create the perfect conditions for wallowing. Still, it's important to ditch your couch-and-sweatpants habit before it becomes routine. Create space internally, mentally, emotionally, and then externally by engaging with people outside the relationship.

Get out of your rut—and reclaim your identity—by partaking in activities that you love or once loved. Go for a hike, scribble in a journal, cook up some comfort food...whatever it takes to make you feel whole again. Direct some much-needed attention to any relationships that may have been on the back burner, and open yourself up to meeting new people, too. A shared interest is always a great ice breaker, so think about signing up for a workshop, class, retreat, or another opportunity to combine a pastime with socialization.

- **Trust your gut.**

Now and always, resolve to heed your intuition and follow your instincts. The internal step, in terms of what to do if you feel like you're being gaslit, is to make the commitment to yourself that you do not have to question your thoughts, feelings, perceptions about anything. That is a choice that you make as an individual to reassess a situation that nobody is allowed to re-narrate anything for you. In other words, your emotions, thoughts, and memories should never be subject to debate—period.

People can also create a safety plan, which includes ways to protect themselves from physical and emotional abuse before, during, and after leaving the relationship or situation. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, a safety plan may include:

- safe places and escape points
- the contact details of people someone can call upon for help
- self-care activities that help someone to cope
- a plan for safely leaving the abusive situation
- When to seek help

According to a set of recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Trusted Source, in domestic relationships, acts of emotional abuse, such as gaslighting, tend to occur alongside other types of abuse.

Over time, gaslighting may escalate into physical violence. Anyone who believes they are experiencing abuse from a partner or family member should seek support.

A person can contact domestic abuse organizations for advice and help with creating a safety plan. For the mental health impact of gaslighting, a person may find it helpful to talk confidentially to a therapist that has experience helping people in abusive relationships.

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger of domestic violence, call 911 or otherwise seek emergency help. Anyone who needs advice or support can contact the **National Domestic Violence Hotline** 24/7 via: phone, at 800-799-7233; live chat, at www.thehotline.org; or by texting LOVEIS to 22522.

Many other resources are available, including helplines, in-person support, and temporary housing. People can find local resources and others classified by demographics, such as support specifically for people of color.

Summary

Gaslighting is a form of abuse that causes someone to doubt their sanity or perceptions. It usually takes place in relationships and social interactions where there is a power imbalance.

A person experiencing gaslighting may become confused, withdrawn, anxious, or defensive about the abusive person's behavior. They may not realize the behavior is abusive.

People experiencing gaslighting can find safe ways to document evidence of the abuse and create a safety plan to protect themselves from harm. A domestic abuse organization or mental health professional may be able to help someone leave or recover from abuse.

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Reviewed by Jessika Workman, RN, MBA-HA. CNO, Lovelace UNM Rehabilitation Hospital, Albuquerque, NM.