

# Gaslighting

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**Gaslighting** is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or in members of a targeted group, making them question their own memory, perception, and sanity. Using persistent denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying, gaslighting involves attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize the victim's belief.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

Instances may range from the denial by an abuser that previous abusive incidents ever occurred to the staging of bizarre events by the abuser with the intention of disorienting the victim. The term originated from the 1938 Patrick Hamilton play Gaslight and its 1940 and 1944 film adaptations, in which the gas-fueled lights in a character's home are dimmed when he turns the attic lights brighter while he searches the attic at night. He convinces his wife that she is imagining the change. The term has been used in clinical and research literature,<sup>[3][4]</sup> as well as in political commentary.<sup>[5][6]</sup>

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## Etymology

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The term originates in the systematic psychological manipulation of a victim by her husband in the 1938 stage play Gaslight, known as Angel Street in the United States, and the film adaptations released in 1940 and 1944.<sup>[7]</sup> In the story, a husband attempts to convince his wife and others that she is insane by manipulating small elements of their environment and insisting that she is mistaken, remembering things incorrectly, or delusional when she points out these changes. The play's title alludes to the dimming of the gas lights in the house while the husband was using the gas lights in the sealed-off attic to search for jewels belonging to a woman whom he had murdered. The wife complains about the dimming lights to her husband, but he insists that she merely imagined it.

The term "gaslighting" has been used colloquially since the 1960s<sup>[8]</sup> to describe efforts to manipulate someone's perception of reality. The term has been used to describe such behaviour in psychoanalytic literature since the 1970s.<sup>[9]</sup> In a 1980 book on child sexual abuse, Florence Rush summarized George Cukor's Gaslight (1944) based on the play and wrote, "even today the word [gaslighting] is used to describe an attempt to destroy another's perception of reality."<sup>[10]</sup>

# Usage

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Sociopaths<sup>[11]</sup> and narcissists<sup>[12]</sup> frequently use gaslighting tactics to abuse and undermine their victims. Sociopaths consistently transgress social mores, break laws and exploit others, but typically also are convincing liars, sometimes charming ones, who consistently deny wrongdoing. Thus, some who have been victimized by sociopaths may doubt their own perceptions.<sup>[11]</sup> Some physically abusive spouses may gaslight their partners by flatly denying that they have been violent.<sup>[4]</sup> Gaslighting may occur in parent-child relationships, with either parent, child, or both lying to the other and attempting to undermine perceptions.<sup>[13]</sup>

An abuser's ultimate goal is to make their victim second-guess their every choice and question their sanity, making them more dependent on the abuser. A tactic which further degrades a target's self-esteem is for the abuser to ignore, then attend to, then ignore the victim again, so that the victim lowers their personal bar for what constitutes affection and perceives themselves as less worthy of affection.<sup>[14]</sup>

There are two characteristics of gaslighting: The abuser wants full control of feelings, thoughts, or actions of the victim; and the abuser discreetly emotionally abuses the victim in hostile, abusive, or coercive ways.<sup>[15]</sup>

It is necessary to understand the warning signs of gaslighting in order to fully start the healing process. Signs of gaslighting include:

1. Withholding information from the victim;
2. Countering information to fit the abuser's perspective;
3. Discounting information;
4. Verbal abuse, usually in the form of jokes;
5. Blocking and diverting the victim's attention from outside sources;
6. Trivializing the victim's worth; and,
7. Undermining victim by gradually weakening them and their thought process.<sup>[16]</sup>

Three most common methods of gaslighting are:

- **Hiding:** The abuser may hide things from the victim and cover up what they have done. Instead of feeling ashamed, the abuser may convince the victim to doubt their own beliefs about the situation and turn the blame on themselves.
- **Changing:** The abuser feels the need to change something about the victim. Whether it be the way the victim dresses or acts, they want the victim to mold into their fantasy. If the victim does not comply, the abuser may convince the victim that he or she is in fact not good enough.
- **Control:** The abuser may want to fully control and have power over the victim. In doing so, the abuser will try to seclude them from other friends and family so only they can influence the victim's thoughts and actions. The abuser gets pleasure from knowing the victim is being fully controlled by them.<sup>[12]</sup>

According to Kate Abramson, the act of gaslighting is not specifically tied to being sexist, although women tend to be frequent targets of gaslighting compared to men who more often engage in gaslighting.<sup>[17]</sup> Abramson explains this as a result of social conditioning, and says "it's part of the structure of sexism that women are supposed to be less confident, to doubt our views, beliefs, reactions, and perceptions, more than men. And gaslighting is aimed at undermining someone's views, beliefs, reactions, and perceptions. The sexist norm of self-doubt, in all its forms, prepares us for just that."<sup>[17]</sup> Abramson says that the final "stage" of gaslighting is severe, major, clinical depression.<sup>[17]</sup>



Ingrid Bergman in the 1944 film  
Gaslight

## In psychiatry

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Gaslighting has been observed between patients and staff in inpatient psychiatric facilities.<sup>[18]</sup>

In a 1981 article, Some Clinical Consequences of Introjection: Gaslighting, Calef and Weinshel argue that gaslighting involves the projection and introjection of psychic conflicts from the perpetrator to the victim: "this imposition is based on a very special kind of 'transfer'... of potentially painful mental conflicts."<sup>[19]</sup> The authors explore a variety of reasons why the victims may have "a tendency to incorporate and assimilate what others externalize and project onto them", and conclude that gaslighting may be "a very complex highly structured configuration which encompasses contributions from many elements of the psychic apparatus."<sup>[19]</sup> Dorpat (1994) describes this as an example of projective identification.<sup>[2]</sup>

With respect to women in particular, Hilde Lindemann says that in such cases, the victim's ability to resist the manipulation depends on "her ability to trust her own judgments". Establishment of "counterstories" may help the victim reacquire "ordinary levels of free agency".<sup>[20]</sup>

In the article "Falsifying Reality, Spawning Evil",<sup>[21]</sup> author David Shasha attempted to discover how one becomes a victim of gaslighting as he dissected the 1944 film Gaslight. According to the article, the gaslighters first choose a target that is vulnerable, mentally weak, easily defeated and manipulated. The victim's ability to defend themselves is usually minimal. In relationships, the manipulation and exploitation of the victim's honesty and love is the main concept in the process of gaslighting. Gaslighting and other methods of interpersonal control are often used by mental health professionals because they are effective for shaping the behavior of other individuals. Gaslighting depends on "first convincing the victim that his thinking is distorted and secondly persuading him that the victimizer's ideas are the correct and true ones."<sup>[22]</sup>

The main intention of the victimizer is to target the victim's mental equilibrium, self-confidence and self-esteem. It is a dangerous form of abuse because it undermines the mental stability of the victim, who becomes depressed and withdrawn and totally dependent on the abuser for their sense of reality.<sup>[23]</sup>

## In politics

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Maureen Dowd was one of the first to use the term in the political context.<sup>[5][24]</sup> She describes the Bill Clinton administration's use of the technique in subjecting Newt Gingrich to small indignities intended to provoke him to make public complaints that "came across as hysterical".<sup>[24][25]</sup>

In describing the prevalence of the technique in US politics of the past few decades, Bryant Welch states in his book State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind:

To say gaslighting was started by the Bushes, Lee Atwater, Karl Rove, Fox News, or any other extant group is not simply wrong, it also misses an important point. Gaslighting comes directly from blending modern communications, marketing, and advertising techniques with long-standing methods of propaganda. They were simply waiting to be discovered by those with sufficient ambition and psychological makeup to use them.<sup>[6]</sup>

Frida Ghitis uses the term gaslighting to describe Russia's global relations. While Russian operatives were active in Crimea, Russian officials continually denied their presence and manipulated the distrust of political groups in their favor.<sup>[26]</sup>

Journalists at the New York Times Magazine, BBC and Teen Vogue, as well as psychologists Bryant Welch, Robert Feldman and Leah McElrath, have described some of the actions of Donald Trump during the 2016 US presidential election and his term as president as examples of gaslighting.<sup>[24][27][28][29][30]</sup> Ben Yagoda wrote in the Chronicle of

Higher Education in January 2017, that the term gaslighting had become topical again as the result of Trump's behavior, saying that Trump's "habitual tendency to say "X", and then, at some later date, indignantly declare, 'I did not say "X". In fact, I would never dream of saying "X"'" had brought new notability to the term.<sup>[5]</sup>

## In romantic relationships

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Gaslighting is often experienced in romantic relationships. The psychological manipulation may include making the victim question their own memory, perception, and sanity. The abuser may invalidate the victim's experiences using dismissive language: "You're crazy. Don't be so sensitive. Don't be paranoid. I was just joking! ... I'm worried; I think you're not well."<sup>[17]</sup>

Rogers and Follingstad say that such dismissals can be detrimental to women's mental health outcomes. They describe psychological abuse as "a range of aversive behaviors that are intended to harm an individual through coercion, control, verbal abuse, monitoring, isolation, threatening, jealousy, humiliation, manipulation, treating one as an inferior, creating a hostile environment, wounding a person regarding their sexuality and/or fidelity, withholding from a partner emotionally and/or physically".<sup>[31]</sup> Although the word "gaslighting" isn't included, gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse that is mainly manipulation and subtle ways of blaming.

Gaslighting has been observed in some cases of marital infidelity: "Therapists may contribute to the victim's distress through mislabeling the [victim's] reactions. [...] The gaslighting behaviors of the spouse provide a recipe for the so-called 'nervous breakdown' for some [victims] [and] suicide in some of the worst situations."<sup>[13][32]</sup>

In "Gaslighting: A Marital Syndrome", Gass and Nichols study extramarital affairs and their consequences on men's spouses. They describe how a man may try to convince his wife that she is imagining things rather than admitting to an affair: "a wife picks up a telephone extension in her own home and accidentally overhears her husband and his girlfriend planning a tryst while he is on a business trip." His denial challenges the evidence of her senses: "I wasn't on the telephone with any girlfriend. You must have been dreaming."<sup>[32]</sup>

Rogers and Follingstad examined women's experiences with psychological abuse as a predictor of symptoms and clinical levels of depression, anxiety, and somatization, as well as suicidal ideation and life functioning. They concluded that psychological abuse affects women's mental health outcomes, but the perceived negative changes in one's traits, problematic relationship schemas, and response styles were stronger indicators of mental health outcomes than the actual abuse.<sup>[31]</sup>

## In the workplace

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Gaslighting in the workplace is when people do things that cause colleagues to question themselves and their actions in a way that is detrimental to their careers.<sup>[33]</sup> The victim may be excluded, made the subject of gossip, persistently discredited or questioned to destroy their confidence. The perpetrator may divert conversations to perceived faults or wrongs.<sup>[34]</sup> Gaslighting can be committed by anyone and can be especially detrimental when the perpetrator has a position of power.<sup>[35]</sup>

## In fiction

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As mentioned above, the name of the abuse derived from the Patrick Hamilton play Gaslight and the film adaptations released in 1940 and 1944. It depicts this type of abuse as occurring to the wife of an abuser. The 1944 American film version was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actor and Best Screenplay, and won the Academy Award for Best Actress (for the lead star Ingrid Bergman) and Best Production Design.

In Roman Polanski's 1968 movie *Rosemary's Baby* (and the 1967 novel it is based on), the titular character Rosemary Woodhouse is gaslighted by most of her acquaintances, including her husband, who turn out to be members of a satanic cult.

La Moustache, a 2005 French movie, depicts a man whose acquaintances (including his wife) adamantly contradict his own perception of reality, starting from the day he shaves his distinctive moustache (which they claim he never had). He soon becomes obsessed about those perception discrepancies over seemingly trivial details, to the point of doubting his own sanity. The narrative is purposely ambiguous, as it can be interpreted as a complex form of social gaslighting, echoing the paranoid setting of novels from Franz Kafka like The Trial or The Castle, or it could be a metaphorical depiction of a man effectively losing grip with reality and subject to a mental disorder.

Gaslighting was also the main theme in a 2016 plotline in BBC's radio soap opera *The Archers*. The story concerned the emotional abuse of Helen Archer by her partner and later husband, Rob Titchener, over the course of two years, and caused much public discussion about the phenomenon.<sup>[36]</sup>

The 2016 American mystery film and psychological thriller *The Girl on the Train* explored the direct effects that gaslighting had on Rachel, the protagonist of the story.<sup>[24]</sup> The perpetrator in the film was in fact Rachel's ex-husband Tom who was the violent abuser. Rachel suffered from severe depression and alcoholism. When Rachel would black out drunk, he consistently told her that she had done terrible things that she was incapable of remembering.<sup>[37]</sup>

For several months during 2018, gaslighting was a main plotline in NBC's soap opera *Days of Our Lives*, as Gabby Hernandez was caught gaslighting her best friend Abigail Deveroux after Gabby was framed for a murder Abigail had committed.<sup>[38]</sup>

## See also

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- 2 + 2 = 5
- Alternative facts
- Authority bias
- Big lie
- Brainwashing
- Cognitive distortion
- Death by a thousand cuts
- Dangerous Crossing
- Deception
- Epistemic injustice
- Guilt trip
- Martha Mitchell effect
- Mind games
- Psychological warfare
- Setting up to fail
- Victim blaming
- Zersetzung

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## Further reading

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## External links

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- [Gaslighting as a Manipulation Tactic: what it is, who does it, and why \(https://counsellingresource.com/features/2011/11/08/gaslighting/\)](https://counsellingresource.com/features/2011/11/08/gaslighting/) by [George K. Simon, Ph.D.](#), article on the topic of gaslighting published by Counselling Resource on November 8, 2011
  - Sarah Strudwick (November 16, 2010) [Dark Souls – Mind Games, Manipulation and Gaslighting \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwWBHRKFYCA\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwWBHRKFYCA) based on her book *Dark Souls: Healing and Recovering from Toxic Relationships*
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