

Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person or a group covertly sows seeds of doubt in a targeted individual, making them question their own memory, perception, or judgment, often evoking in them cognitive dissonance and other changes such as low self-esteem. Using denial, misdirection, contradiction, and misinformation, gaslighting involves attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize the victim's beliefs. 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 play *Gas Light* and its 1940 and 1944 film adaptations (both titled *Gaslight*). The term has been used in clinical psychological literature,^{[1]:31–46}^[2] as well as in political commentary, philosophy,^[3] and popular culture.

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Etymology

The term originates in the systematic psychological manipulation of a victim by her husband in the 1938 stage play *Gas Light*,^[4] and the film adaptations released in 1940 and 1944.^[5] In the story, the 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 how the abusive husband slowly dims the gas lights in their home, while pretending nothing has changed, in an effort to make his wife doubt her own perceptions. He further uses the lights in the sealed-off attic to secretly search for jewels

belonging to a woman whom he has murdered. He makes loud noises as he searches, including talking to himself. The wife repeatedly asks her husband to confirm her perceptions about the dimming lights, noises and voices, but in defiance of reality, he keeps insisting that the lights are the same and instead it is she who is going insane.^{[6]:8} He intends on having her assessed and committed to a mental institution, after which he will be able to gain power of attorney over her and search more effectively.



Ingrid Bergman in the 1944 film *Gaslight*

The term "gaslighting" has been used colloquially since the 1960s^[7] 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.^[8] 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."^[9]

Characteristics

Gaslighting involves a person, or a group of persons, the *victimizer*, and a second person, the *victim*. It can be either conscious or unconscious, and is carried out covertly such that the resulting emotional abuse is not overtly abusive.^[10]

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".^{[1]:45} Gaslighting induces cognitive dissonance in the victim, "often quite emotionally charged cognitive dissonance",^[11] and makes the victim question their own thinking, perception and reality testing, and thereby tends to evoke in them low self-esteem and disturbing ideas and affects, and may facilitate development of confusion, anxiety, depression and in some cases even psychosis.^{[1]:33–34} After the victim loses confidence in their mental capacities and develop a sense of learned helplessness,^[12] they become more susceptible to the victimizer's control.^{[1]:34}

Victims tend to be people with less power and authority.^{[13]:7}

The role of either victimizer or victim can oscillate within a given relationship, and often each of the participants is convinced that they are the victim.^[14] When a group of people acts as the victimizer, gaslighting does its damage through the group members' "small, often invisible actions that have power through their accumulation and reinforcement".^[15] Gaslighting has been used by individuals and groups for "attaining interpersonal and social control over the psychic functioning of other individuals and groups".^{[1]:6}

Psychoanalytic explanation

In a 1981 article, psychoanalysts Victor Calef and Edward Weinshel argued that gaslighting involves the projection and introjection (the "transfer") of psychic contents from the victimizer to the victim.^[14] The psychic contents include affects, perceptions, impulses, resistances, fantasies, delusions, conflicts. The authors explored a variety of reasons why the victims may have "a tendency

to incorporate and assimilate what others externalize and project onto them", and concluded that gaslighting may be "a very complex highly structured configuration which encompasses contributions from many elements of the psychic apparatus".^[14]

Later, psychiatrist Theodore Dorpat described this "transfer" of the victimizer's unconscious psychic contents as an example of projective identification.^{[16][1]:5–6, 40} For projective identification to be most effective, the victim would be unaware of being gaslighted. It becomes destructive when the victim as well identifies with the contents of the "transfer" (what has been projected). These effects however are cancelled when the victim becomes capable of disbelieving and disidentifying with the negative introjects that result from projective identification.

In personality disorders

Sociopaths^[17] and narcissists^[18] 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.^[17] Some physically abusive spouses may gaslight their partners by flatly denying that they have been violent.^[2] Gaslighting may occur in parent–child relationships, with either parent, child, or both lying to the other and attempting to undermine perceptions.^[19]

In psychiatry

Gaslighting has been observed between patients and staff in inpatient psychiatric facilities.^[20]

In a 1996 book, Dorpat claimed that "gaslighting and other methods of interpersonal control are widely used by mental health professionals as well as other people" because they are effective methods for shaping the behavior of other individuals.^{[1]:45} He noted that covert methods of interpersonal control such as gaslighting are used by clinicians with authoritarian attitudes,^{[1]:xiii–xxi} and he recommended instead more non-directive and egalitarian attitudes and methods on the part of clinicians,^{[1]:225} "treating patients as active collaborators and equal partners".^{[1]:246}

In politics

Columnist Maureen Dowd was one of the first to use the term in the political context.^{[21][22]} She described 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".^{[22][23]}

In his 2008 book *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*, psychologist Bryant Welch described the prevalence of the technique in American politics beginning in the age of modern communications, stating:

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.^[24]

Journalist Frida Ghitis used 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.^[25]

Journalists at the *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.^{[22][26][27][28][29]} Journalism professor 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.^[21]

Gaslighting is utilized by leaders and followers of sectarian groups to ensure conformity of any potentially deviating members.^[30]

In romantic relationships

In interpersonal relationships, the victimizer "needs to be right" in order to "preserve his own sense of self", and "his sense of having power in the world"; and the victim allows the victimizer to "define her sense of reality" inasmuch as the victim "idealizes him" and "seeks his approval".^{[6]:3}

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."^[3]

Psychologists Jill Rogers and Diane Follingstad said that such dismissals can be detrimental to mental health outcomes. They described 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".^[31]

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."^{[19][32]}

In their 1988 article "Gaslighting: A Marital Syndrome", psychologists Gertrude Zemon Gass and William Nichols studied extramarital affairs and their consequences on men's spouses.^[32] They described 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."^[32]

Rogers and Follingstand 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.^[31]

Psychotherapist Stephanie Moulton Sarkis explained that it takes "a certain amount of cognitive dissonance to remain connected to a gaslighter" and that "the healthiest way to resolve cognitive dissonance" in such situations involves "leaving or distancing yourself from the gaslighter".^{[13]:24–25}

Signs and methods

As described by Patricia Evans, seven "warning signs" of gaslighting are the observed abuser's:^[33]

1. Withholding information from the victim;
2. Countering information to fit the abuser's perspective;
3. Discounting information;
4. Using verbal abuse, usually in the form of jokes;
5. Blocking and diverting the victim's attention from outside sources;
6. Trivializing ("minimising") the victim's worth; and,
7. Undermining the victim by gradually weakening them and their thought processes.

Evans considers it necessary to understand the warning signs in order to begin the process of healing from it.^[33]

The psychologist Elinor Greenberg has described three common methods of gaslighting:^[18]

1. *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.
2. *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.
3. *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.

An abuser's ultimate goal, as described by the divorce process coach Lindsey Ellison, is to make their victim second-guess their choices and to question their sanity, making them more dependent on the abuser.^[34] One tactic used to degrade a victim's self-esteem is the abuser alternating between ignoring and attending to the victim, so that the victim lowers their expectation of what constitutes affection, and perceives themselves as less worthy of affection.^[34]

Role of gender

Psychotherapist Stephanie Moulton Sarkis, who observed gaslighting to be present in about 30–40% of the couples she treats, says that "Gaslighting is as likely to be done by men as women"^[35] and that "as far as we know, the genders are represented equally".^{[13]:27} She explains further that we tend to think gaslighters to be mostly men because "men are often more reluctant (perhaps embarrassed) to talk to someone about a female partner who is being emotionally abusive".^{[13]:27}

In the context of the social inequalities and power-laden intimate relationships of domestic violence, sociologist Paige Sweet has studied gaslighting tactics that "are gendered in that they rely on the association of femininity with irrationality".^[36]

According to philosophy professor 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.^[3] Abramson explained this as a result of social conditioning, and said "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."^[3] Abramson said that the final "stage" of gaslighting is severe, major, clinical depression.^[3]

With respect to women in particular, philosophy professor Hilde Lindemann said that in such cases, the victim's ability to resist the manipulation depends on "her ability to trust her own judgements". Establishment of "counterstories" may help the victim reacquire "ordinary levels of free agency".^[37]

In the workplace

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.^[38] 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.^[39] Gaslighting can be committed by anyone and can be especially detrimental when the perpetrator has a position of power.^[40]

In popular culture

In the October 1968 episode of *The Doris Day Show* titled "The Matchmakers", the character played by Fran Ryan says to actor James Hampton "Thought for a minute you were giving me the gaslight treatment", when she thinks Hampton's character is trying to convince her that the dog owned by Day in the series can talk. While not the adjective "gaslighting", it is close enough to indicate the term was in use in popular culture at the time.^[41]

Pop group Steely Dan features a song entitled "Gaslighting Abbie" on their 2000 album *Two Against Nature*.

The 2016 mystery and psychological thriller film *The Girl on the Train* explored the direct effects gaslighting had on the protagonist (Rachel).^[22] Rachel's ex-husband Tom who was the violent abuser is the victimizer. 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.^[42]

Gaslighting was the main theme of 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.^[43]

For several months during 2018, gaslighting was a main plotline in NBC's soap opera *Days of Our Lives*, as character Gabi Hernandez was caught gaslighting her best friend Abigail Deveroux after Gabi was framed for a murder Abigail had committed in the series.^[44]

See also

- [2 + 2 = 5](#)
- [Alternative facts](#)
- [Authority bias](#)
- [Autonomy](#)
- [Big lie](#)
- [Brainwashing](#)
- [Cognitive distortion](#)
- [Confabulation](#)
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- [Professional abuse](#)
- [Psychological warfare](#)
- [Setting up to fail](#)
- [Stockholm syndrome](#)
- [Victim blaming](#)
- [Zersetzung](#)

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Further reading

- Santoro, Victor (1994-06-30). *Gaslighting: How to Drive Your Enemies Crazy*. Loompanics Unlimited. ISBN 978-1-55950-113-2. OCLC 35172282 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/35172282>). (offline resource)

External links

- Sarah Strudwick (November 16, 2010) Dark Souls – Mind Games, Manipulation and Gaslighting (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwWBHRKFYCA>) based on her book *Dark Souls: Healing and Recovering from Toxic Relationships*
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