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What is Gaslighting? | The National Domestic Violence Hotline

4-5 minutes



“You’re crazy – that never happened.”

“Are you sure? You tend to have a bad memory.”

“It’s all in your head.”

Does your partner repeatedly say things like this to you? Do you often start questioning your own

perception of reality, even your own sanity, within your relationship? If so, your partner may be using what mental health professionals call “gaslighting.”

This term comes from the 1938 stage play *Gas Light*, in which a husband attempts to drive his wife crazy by dimming the lights (which were powered by gas) in their home, and then he denies that the light changed when his wife points it out. It is an extremely effective form of [emotional abuse](#) that causes a victim to question their own feelings, instincts, and sanity, which gives the abusive partner a lot of power (and we know that abuse is about [power and control](#)). Once an abusive partner has broken down the victim’s ability to trust their own perceptions, the victim is more likely to stay in the abusive relationship.

There are a variety of gaslighting techniques that an abusive partner might use:

Withholding: the abusive partner pretends not to understand or refuses to listen. Ex. “I don’t want to hear this again,” or “You’re trying to confuse me.”

Countering: the abusive partner questions the victim’s memory of events, even when the victim remembers them accurately. Ex. “You’re wrong, you never remember things correctly.”

Blocking/Diverting: the abusive partner changes the subject and/or questions the victim’s thoughts. Ex. “Is that another crazy idea you got from [friend/family member]?” or “You’re imagining things.”

Trivializing: the abusive partner makes the victim’s needs or feelings seem unimportant. Ex. “You’re going to get angry over a little thing like that?” or “You’re too sensitive.”

Forgetting/Denial: the abusive partner pretends to have forgotten what actually occurred or denies things like promises made to the victim.

Ex. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” or
“You’re just making stuff up.”

(Adapted from: [Source](#))

Gaslighting typically happens very gradually in a relationship; in fact, the abusive partner’s actions may seem harmless at first. Over time, however, these abusive patterns continue and a victim can become confused, anxious, isolated, and depressed, and they can lose all sense of what is actually happening. Then they start relying on the abusive partner more and more to define reality, which creates a very difficult situation to escape.

In order to overcome this type of abuse, it’s important to start recognizing the signs and eventually learn to trust yourself again.

[According to author and psychoanalyst Robin Stern, Ph.D.](#), the signs of being a victim of gaslighting include:

- You constantly second-guess yourself.

- You ask yourself, “Am I too sensitive?” multiple times a day.
- You often feel confused and even crazy.
- You’re always apologizing to your partner.
- You can’t understand why, with so many apparently good things in your life, you aren’t happier.
- You frequently make excuses for your partner’s behavior to friends and family.
- You find yourself withholding information from friends and family so you don’t have to explain or make excuses.
- You know something is terribly wrong, but you can never quite express what it is, even to yourself.
- You start lying to avoid the put downs and reality twists.
- You have trouble making simple decisions.
- You have the sense that you used to be a very

different person – more confident, more fun-loving, more relaxed.

- You feel hopeless and joyless.
- You feel as though you can't do anything right.
- You wonder if you are a “good enough” partner.

If any of these signs ring true for you, give us a call at 1-800-799-7233 or chat with us online 24/7/365. Our advocates are here to support and listen to you.