



Repair Your Reality After Gaslighting

In the movie *Gaslight*, Gregory sets out to convince his wife Paula that she is insane. He secretly removes items from their home and tells her she did it. He isolates her from others. He uses her growing distress to “prove” she is unstable. When she notices the gas lights in their home dim and flicker, he assures her she is imagining things.

The term gaslighting is now used to describe psychological abuse that attempts to destroy the victim’s trust in their perceptions of reality. People who distrust their perceptions are easier to manipulate and control.

Abuse-related gaslighting. Not every instance of gaslighting is as blatant as hiding items or directly denying someone’s perceptions. Most abuse includes an element of gaslighting. Abusers rarely say out loud, “I’m choosing to abuse you.”

- A physically abusive spouse says, “I’m doing this for your own good. You shouldn’t provoke me.” In truth, victims do not cause abuse.
- A sexually abusive parent says, “This isn’t happening. I love you. You like it. It doesn’t hurt.” In truth, abuse is not loving behavior. Children do not ask for assault. The pain is real.
- A ritually abusive group stages abuse so bizarre and extreme that victims do not believe their own memories. Real bloodshed and torture are combined with drugs and misdirection, adding

to the sense of unreality.

Everyday gaslighting. Gaslighting occurs in more subtle ways as well, any time someone responds as if your reality does not exist.

- An adult says to a crying child, “There’s no reason to be sad. Give us a nice smile.”
- A partner says, “That’s too hard for you. Let me do it.”
- A friend snaps, “I’m not angry! Why are you starting a fight?”
- A narcissist reacts with so much contempt when you assert any needs that you feel like the selfish one.
- After being called on a racist or sexist comment, the speaker says, “Just kidding!” or “You’re too sensitive!” or “You’re looking for reasons to be offended.”

Signs of gaslighting. Gaslighting can be hard to spot, especially when it has been happening for a while. When you have been taught to doubt your perceptions, it is difficult to assert that doubt is caused by something outside you. Suspect gaslighting when you notice:

- **Confusion.** You feel confused and off-balance when you interact with someone. You receive puzzling responses to ordinary actions, and your reactions are labeled wrong or unreasonable.
- **Fears about mental stability.** You worry that you are going crazy. Someone repeatedly expresses concern that you’ll have a nervous breakdown.
- **Conflict about memory.** You hear, “I never said

that,” when you clearly remember hearing it. You frequently hear, “You’re imagining things,” or “You remember that wrong.” Memory differences can be expressed respectfully by saying, “I don’t remember saying that,” or “I don’t remember it that way.”

- **Emotional vertigo.** You have a sense of dizziness, or no place to stand, when you try to make sense of a situation. The facts do not add up, but you see that as a flaw in yourself rather than in the situation. This can lead to obsessive thoughts as you try to figure it out.
- **Distrust of your perceptions.** You ask others to confirm what you notice. When someone disagrees with you, you immediately assume you were wrong. Do you remember a time when you did trust your perceptions? When did that change?

Breathe into doubt. When you notice any of these signs, allow compassion for yourself. Breathe into your truth. “I don’t know what to believe. I feel crazy.” Bring kindness to your experience of confusion and doubt.

Keep a record. If you have enough privacy, it can bring relief to record your thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Your journal can receive your conflicting impressions without the need for certainty. If someone questions your memory, you can look back at your notes. If items mysteriously appear and disappear, you can take strategic photographs of problem areas.

Listen within. To rebuild self-trust and repair your reality, tune in to your internal signals with interested curiosity. In her book *The Power of Focusing*, Ann Weiser Cornell

teaches Inner Relationship Focusing, a simple method for connecting with yourself. When you notice a sensation or emotion, you can keep it company, listening for its truth without expecting it to change.

- Something in me feels anxious, and I say hello to that.
- My belly feels tight, and I say hello to that.
- I don't know what I feel, and I say hello to that.

If you feel judgmental of what you notice, you can turn your listening attention toward judgment.

- Something in me hates that I feel anxious, and I say hello to that.
- Something in me wants my belly to relax, and I say hello to that.
- Something in me says I should know what I feel, and I say hello to that.

As you listen inside, your vague sensations will become more clear. As parts of you feel fully heard, they will shift and heal. As you practice listening, you will regain confidence in your perceptions.

Ignore motives. In the movie *Gaslight*, Gregory's manipulation of his wife is part of a hidden plot to find her aunt's jewels. Sometimes gaslighting helps an abuser maintain a more sympathetic self-image as well as concealing abuse. Gaslighting often lacks an apparent motive, which adds to the victim's confusion and self-doubt.

You do not have to figure out why someone is gaslighting you. You do not even have to label the behavior as gaslighting. You can simply say hello to your confusion and need to understand.

Seek out support. It can be tempting to ask others to

confirm your perceptions of gaslighting. Unfortunately, others may be unaware of what is happening and do not have your moment by moment observations. Turn your attention toward what is true for you.

- Something in me is uncertain, and I say hello to that.
- Something in me desperately wants confirmation, and I say hello to that.

Instead of taking a poll on whether your perceptions are correct, seek out people who support you in welcoming all your perceptions.

Rebuild self-trust. As you repair your relationship with yourself, the effects of gaslighting will gradually fall away. Over time, your boundaries will heal, and you will naturally say no to emotionally abusive behavior.